TATTOO BLADE 2

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Fujimi Fantasia Bunko

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Prologue

How much time has passed since I came to this place?
The man had forgotten even that. A long sleep had robbed him of his sense of time, and his memories of the past had faded.
He even questioned who he was, whether he truly existed at all.
Only the memory of being brought here for the first time remained.
Back then, the man had been completely naked.
“Seems you dislike bright places, banished one.”
Called by someone, the man regained consciousness.
In that instant, the overwhelming glare made him cover his eyes.
The surroundings were pure white. He couldn't even tell the floor from the walls.
In a space worthy of being called nothingness, the man writhed in agony.
“Where am I... El Paso police station? Or a prison?”
“Neither. But let me tell you this upfront: it's far from El Paso.”
“Who... are you?” The man forced his eyes open, trying to locate the voice's owner.
Standing close by was a man in a black military uniform.
Still in his twenties. His eyes, brimming with confidence, held a fierce intensity.
His features were handsome, but a long scar ran across his cheek.
The blond-haired soldier flicked his hair and flashed a cunning smile.
It was that superior expression white men of privilege wore.
“Get lost. I have no use for white boys.”
“A greeting, then. My name is Otto Skorzeny.” The soldier introduced himself courteously. "We need many men like you. I'm afraid we had to sedate you with drugs to bring you here. The feeling of annoyance will pass quickly. Soon you'll thank me."
“Don't be ridiculous. Me, thank a white man?” The naked man unleashed savagery from his throat.
He would punish anyone who looked down on him, no matter who they were.
True to his life steeped in violence, he swung his fist at the soldier.
But as the pure white light intensified, the man writhed in sudden, excruciating pain.
He writhed on the pure white floor, clawing at his throat and vomiting.
The man calling himself Skorzeny looked down at him coldly.
“Rest assured. I have no intention of harming you.”
“...But you took me out of New Mexico without permission.”
“That's correct. And this isn't even the United States.”
“So where is this?”
A flicker of cruelty touched Scorzeny's lips.
“The promised land prepared to fulfill our people's dream.”
“What the hell...”
“A modest island we call the Fourth Reich.”
Scorzeny placed his palm on the man's broad chest.
“It's painful, I know. But bear with it a little longer. This is the only way to bring about the breach.”

“The breach...?”
As he gasped the question, Skorzeny's mouth curved into a faint smile.
“The light you see is not the light of reality. It is the countless hostilities directed at you. Hatred. Right now, you are surrounded by the will of those who persecuted you.”
The moment the words left his lips, countless scenes erupted in the man's mind.
Unemployment ran rampant in the Native American reservation. His father drowned himself in drink, while his mother worked herself to the bone day after day.
Then she too was struck down by a white man's car, reduced to a paltry insurance payout.
My rage against the white man grew daily, and then that mark appeared.
The first crime. Raging lust trampled a white woman.
Then exile from the tribe. All that remained was to flee into darkness.
"Aaaargh!!”
“Just as I expected. It is precisely because of that hatred that the tattoo was carved.”
Then, an ominous tattoo appeared on the man's chest.
The image of a living bat, springing forth, plotting, filled with hatred.
Ever since it suddenly surfaced fifteen years ago, it had only fueled the man's brutality.
Skorzeny seemed to know a lot about him – including when the tattoo appeared.
“Days seeking an outlet but finding none... they lasted long. But you need no longer fear the light and flee into darkness. I shall grant darkness to your tattoo. And when the tattoo takes over your body, you shall gain the power of a Demon. You possess the right to it.”
"Aaaaaaaaah!”
“Accept it—the soul unleashed from an ancient slumber.”
Before their eyes, darkness gushed forth from the man's body.
It smothered the surrounding pure white, gradually revealing the world as it truly was.
“S-Skorzeny, my maste-e-e-er!!”
The naked man found himself screaming this. Skorzeny, looking satisfied, clasped his hand.
“Very well. My new Demon of the Netherworld.”
The screams ceased, and silence descended.
How much time had passed since then?
The man had waited endlessly in that dark stillness.
For the moment to test his power. For the moment to serve the empire that had granted him strength.
And the voice announcing his awakening was, as before, that man's voice.
“Your long slumber is over, Banished One.”
Summoned by Skorzeny, the man rose from the darkness.
The blond soldier remained unchanged, his cruel beauty intact.
Skorzeny breathed upon the kneeling man. His breath was cold.
“At last, it is our turn to act. Work to your heart's content.”
The man's body burned. No, it seethed with heat.
The cruelty accumulated during years of slumber craved an enemy.
Skorzeny seemed to take particular delight in this thirst.
“Your opponent is the perfect man for you. And he is also the empire's sworn enemy.”

“And who is that?”
“Let's just say… he can manipulate Blood.”
The man licked his lips with evident pleasure.
“I'm the one who manipulates blood.”
“Very well. Go forth. The Führer is approaching.” Skorzeny straightened his back as he spoke. From the depths of the darkness, a figure advanced without a sound.
Overwhelming waves of dread emanated from that person.
The Führer of the Fourth Reich sighed deeply at the two demonic figures.
“Skorzeny, at last.”
“Yes. Since Gents' failure, I've been waiting for an opportunity. At last, the conditions are right for executing the operation I desire. This time, I will succeed.”
“So the operation you’ve planned is, naturally, a diversion.”
At the Führer's question, Skorzeny shifted his scarred face.
“Absolutely. It's a somewhat of a ruse, but deceiving people is my natural talent. I'll slip right into their inner circle and show you.”
“We won't repeat Gents' mistake.”
“I'd say I don't favor straightforward approaches.”
Skorzeny maintained his posture and continued.
"Lorraine Rosenberg became the gateway to the other side. The gate opens when the key is exchanged. But once that tattoo grows, the gate should open even without the key."
“Precisely. That is why we must nurture it, not seize it, Skorzeny. Once that tattoo takes over the girl's body, the gate will open, and we too can return to the other side. We must hasten that moment.”
“Understood.” Skorzeny bowed.
“Time is on our side, Your Excellency. The tattoo will grow even if left alone. But it is a precious bud. If my Trinity Squad tends it with our hands, it will bloom more swiftly and splendidly.”
The Supreme Leader smiled at those words, but soon tightened his lips.
“But the Hououji clan... seems a bit too formidable to defeat head-on.”
“I can assure you, they pose no threat to my plan.”
Skorzeny pointed at the man standing by.
“With him, exploiting Hououji Daiga's weakness should be easy. Can we win?”
The Führer's gaze fixed on the man. A spine-crushing dread washed over him.
Finally, the Führer squeezed out a freezing, vengeful command.
“You are dependable. Extinguish the bloodline of that clan.”
At the Führer's command, the man silently bowed low.
Yet within, he was ecstatic at being entrusted by such a figure.
For the first time in his life, the man had earned trust.

【Chapter 1】

August had arrived in Tokyo, blanketing it in subtropical temperatures.
Even Nagatacho, located in the heart of Tokyo, was no exception, the cicadas' cries piercing the ears. But in this room, neither the outside heat nor the clamor reached them. Instead, a cold silence enveloped the people gathered there.
“I too shall return, having gained a new host!”
A sinister hologram screamed from the round table.
“I will return!” Black vapor. Then a blinding flash. The image distorted.
Finally, slender fingers halted the hologram.
“That concludes the battle at Tsukiji Station underground.”
Prime Minister's Office conference room. Reiko Sakimizu rose quietly from her seat.
“The recording was made by Team Ascalon. They suffered heavy losses, including civilian casualties, but succeeded in repelling B.”
Her long black hair swayed as she turned her gaze to the people gathered around the round table. She paused for a breath, dressed in a business suit.
“The incident remains completely confidential. All traces of B have been recovered. The same applies to Jingū Medical University and Hamarikyu.”
“A classified hostile entity... B?”
The Foreign Minister murmured, covering his mouth with a handkerchief.
No wonder, Reiko thought. The holographic footage Reiko had shown depicted sacrifices being slaughtered and absorbed.
The gruesome images were the first successful recordings of their true form, even for Reiko's organization.
Reiko belonged to an organization that was also part of the Metropolitan Police Department's International Crime Investigation Unit. Its name was the Ziegen Agency. Originally, its purpose was to hunt down Nazi war criminals.
But now, what Reiko and her team were pursuing were beings that were not human.
“Detective Inspector Sakomizu, why is Japan being targeted now? And so openly?”
“The reason is the existence of the Hōōji clan.”
Reiko declared to the National Public Safety Commission Chairman.
“The Hōōji clan is the only force capable of opposing B. Their successor has come of age. B will likely continue targeting Japan to eliminate them.”
“A double-edged sword. They're our only hope, yet they make us a target.”
The National Public Safety Commission Chairman stroked his chin.
“Then what was the reason the girl living with the Hōōji family was attacked? This Lorraine... Rosenberg girl. It seems B first tried to take her.”
“He intended to use her as a hostage” Reiko carefully concealed the truth.
“The young heir shares a special bond with Lorraine. B sought to exploit that to plot the heir's assassination.”
“Any particular reason he'd be targeted by B?”
“None confirmed at this time.” She wasn't lying. But she was withholding information.
She didn't intend to relay everything to the Japanese government.

Reiko was an International Crime Investigator for the Metropolitan Police Department, but now she was a member of the Ziegen Agency.

“The Ziegen Agency requests the activation of Directive B against the permanent members of the UN Security Council.”

Reiko fixed her gaze on the central figure among the cabinet ministers.

“Specifically, Japan must enter a Level One alert status. A catastrophe surpassing the Tsukiji Incident is anticipated. Prime Minister, we request your prompt decision.”

Hearing this, the man in the suit leaned back in his chair.

“Directive B, huh...” The Prime Minister, still in his fifties, suddenly smiled.

Before him lay a file marked prominently with a large ‘B’.

"I never imagined it would be activated during my term. Of all the things I inherited from past prime ministers, this one is undoubtedly the worst."

He then turned his gaze to Reiko.

“We must not involve the citizens.”

“That is precisely why the Ziegen Agency has been preparing for nearly thirty years. As outlined in the file, please ensure all ministries and agencies act in accordance with Directive B, Level One Alert Status.”

The Prime Minister stood and surveyed the ministers around the round table.

“Effective immediately, I activate Directive B, Level One Alert... Chief Cabinet Secretary.”

“Yes, sir. Regarding information control, we deem the threat from B too grave to disclose further. However, we plan to gradually infiltrate awareness of B's existence through deliberate leaks.”

“I'll leave the public opinion shaping to you. The people will find out eventually anyway. Minister of Justice?”

The man, who had been pale, straightened his back.

“Yes. We wish to prevent B's entry into the country first, but detection is currently impossible. However, we intend to prevent the vanguard, designated “I”, from entering at the border.”

The Minister of Justice began flipping through the documents before him.

“We will immediately strengthen immigration procedures. To detect I, we will install at international airports the equipment provided by the Ziegen Agency—the uh...”

“Gel-Site Scanner. It's a liquid parasite detector,”

Reiko replied in his stead.

"It can detect “I” parasitizing the skull. But if I is already within the country..."

“We'll utilize this year's national census.”

The stern-faced Minister of Internal Affairs stated decisively.

“As soon as suspicious foreigners are identified, we'll mandate skull scans. We're also coordinating with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to require skull X-rays during health checkups for Japanese citizens.”

Reiko smiled. This was moving too fast.

The Minister of Internal Affairs wanted to use this opportunity to crack down on illegal immigrants too, even if it was a clear overreach of authority.

“But searching for B is impossible. A state of emergency seems unavoidable. From now on, the opinions of the Defense Agency and the National Public Safety Commission will take absolute priority. This applies to legal preparations as well.”
At the Prime Minister's words, the Chairman of the Joint Staff Council of the Self-Defense Forces stood and bowed.
Everyone thought of the exact same thing. Wartime.
Beside him, the National Public Safety Commission Chairman received a whisper from the National Police Agency Commissioner.
“Sakimizu, your authority will also be strengthened. Effective today, you are promoted to Superintendent.” The Chairman announced quietly.
"However, this is a temporary promotion. We can't issue an official appointment order. We can't publicly announce a five-rank special promotion. Normally, this is a position for Regional Headquarters Commanders... a post absolutely unattainable in your twenties."
“Understood.”
“Additionally, you're being seconded to the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office. Until this situation concludes.”
When will this situation end?
As Reiko thought this, the Prime Minister exhaled deeply.
"At the request of the Ziegen Agency, the Ministry of Finance has already made an emergency contribution. Funds to develop weapons to counter B, I hear."
“Yes, we requested contributions from the UN permanent members.”
“But the weapon we can rely on most is the Hōōji clan.”
The ministers' gazes also turned to Reiko.
The Prime Minister asked slowly.
“Where is that boy now? What is he doing?”
Reiko offered a gentle smile.

The boy stood in the darkness.
Wearing only boxer shorts, his body was nearly bare.
Countless scars crisscrossed his well-trained physique.
The newest wounds, in particular, were large, deep, and deeply etched.
Even so, the boy's body still appeared beautiful.
A body like a sword polished over and over, devoid of even the slightest bit of excess flesh. His jet-black and golden hair evoked the mane of a noble predator.
The eyes peering out from beneath that hair emitted a gaze as sharp as blades. And at the end of that gaze...
“...We meet again.” A man in a long coat appeared. Middle-aged. His right hand was withered like a mummy's.
With a gloomy smile, the man called the boy's name.
“This time, I'll finally put an end to you, Daiga Hououji.”
“Gentsu Quadar, of the Celestial Demon Clan.”
The boy knew his opponent's name too.
No, he knew it all too well. To the boy, this man was his mother's killer.

Then, a new presence stirred behind the boy.
“I won't let you escape, you little brat.”
The old man who appeared drooled from the corners of his mouth.
“Do you think you can dodge our cursed legacy, the Jomon, all at once?”
“Vow Nguyen Ian, of the Underworld Demon Clan.”
The boy knew the old man's name too.
But immediately after, a woman in a red suit appeared.
“When our trinity joins forces, defeat is impossible.”
With a bewitching gaze, she spread her arms wide.
“We'll burn you to ashes. You will lose.”
“Katarina Almeida, of the Underworld Demon Clan.”
As the boy braced himself, an unnatural power surged within the three encircling figures.
First, blazing flames suddenly coiled around the sorceress Katarina's arms - holding the writhing, scorching heat like serpents, Katarina licked her soft lips.
Next, a dull sound emanated from Old Man Vow's body.
What the? Reptilian forelimbs had sprouted from his side!
Then, Gents flashed his withered right hand - the next instant, a black saber appeared in his hand from nowhere.
Gents narrowed his eyes, thrusting the jet-black blade toward the boy.
“This fight will be over in an instant. You can die easily.” None of the three were human. They were monsters in human form. Entities known as the Demon Horde.
And the boy had fought them before. In fact, it was the boy himself who had killed all three. Then why was he facing them again?
The boy alone felt no doubt, unleashing his power.
“I'm not that kind. I won't kill you easily.”
Before he finished speaking, Katarina crossed her arms.
Flaming serpents coiled around her arms leapt viciously at the boy.
From diagonally behind. Outside his field of vision. Swift as a gust of wind.
But the boy didn't even turn around, leaping vertically upward with lightning speed.
Clearing the explosion, he retreated outside the demon horde's encirclement.
“I won't let you escape.” Katarina swung her arms, launching the flame serpents once more.
The boy crossed his arms in an X, planting his feet firmly in place.
It seemed nothing short of reckless. The flames charged forward without hesitation.
Colliding head-on with the inferno, the boy appeared to be consumed...
Yet the flames that should have engulfed him screamed and scattered.
The boy's arm emitted a black flash, repelling the flames like a barrier.
“You used the Genbu Shield?” Katarina identified the boy's power.
But the boy gave no answer, instead abruptly shifting the power coursing through his body.
The jet-black flash dwelling in his arm instantly transformed into pure white.
He spun around and brought his hand blade crashing down on the skull of the old man Vow, who was closing in.
"Nnnngh!” The boy's brute strength cleaved the human body like tofu!

Old Man Vow, who had aimed for a surprise attack from behind, instead sprayed blood everywhere.
That blood, a rainbow-hued, machine-oil-like color. The blood of a non-human.
“Byakko’s… Fist...!” His skull split clean in two, yet his mouth still screamed his death throes. The way he vanished into black vapor was fitting for a Demon.
But without a moment's pause, a black saber lunged at the boy from within the vapor.
“Don't forget - there are still two of us left.”
Gentsu concealed himself in the black vapor, closing in on the boy.
Behind him, Katarina had appeared at some point, weaving a flame strike.
Yet, caught between the saber and the serpent of fire, the boy remained unruffled.
“You look like you're standing still.” Then, the boy vanished abruptly.
As if he had never existed, even his presence vanished.
Gents hurriedly withdrew his saber, and Katarina reeled in her flames.
Then both demon hordes turned their gaze upward into the pitch-black sky.
“Seiryu’s Wings!” Indeed, the boy soared through the darkness.
Trailing blue flashes, he locked onto the demon hordes with a hawk-like gaze.
Then, as he dove downward, a long, crimson blade materialized in his hand.
That very blade was the flash of steel that cleaved demons. The crystallization of the boy's power. The boy slashed at Gentsu with his crimson blade.
“You bastard!” Too fast. The sword's path was too swift for the eye to follow, leaving no chance to dodge. Gentsu barely managed to twist his upper body aside, but a single stroke ripped open his chest. As Gentsu gritted his teeth against the pain, black vapor poured from the wound.
The boy let out a short roar, landing and flicking his blade upward.
The finishing blow. But behind him, Katarina had closed the distance.
“Foolish! Your back is exposed!”
But Katarina's cry ended there.
The boy swiftly delivered a right roundhouse kick to the demoness.
Moreover, the tips of his curled toes emitted the same white flash as before.
His toes, like a white blade, sliced horizontally across Katarina's throat.
The next instant, rainbow-colored blood spurted from the demoness's mouth.
“Byakko’s Fist... on his foot...!”
As Katarina collapsed, the boy turned his gaze back to Gentsu.
Gentsu was already raising his saber.
The boy measured the distance with sliding steps, calming his breath.
“...Slash and chop.” The boy nodded at Gentsu's declaration.
“Then so will I.” Their stances closed, and it began.
Gentsu's arms spun at a furious pace.
He swung his saber down, thrust it upward, then swung it down again.
The speed was so great it was impossible to track each individual stroke with the naked eye.
With each strike, the earth shook, the wind screamed, and the darkness trembled.
Yet the boy parried every one of Gentsu's blows with precision - he swung his crimson blade in all directions, deflecting the heavy strikes.

A duel where even the sound of swords clashed couldn't keep up, only flashes colliding.
Then both men withdrew their blades.
“...Yeah, that's right.” Suddenly, the boy smiled.
“You definitely fought like that. I remember it well.”
Then he fixed his gaze straight ahead, the tip of his blade steady.
“That's why we can fight again.” Gentsu remained silent, leaping forward. He shifted his weight onto his saber and swung it down toward the boy's skull.
But the boy darted diagonally, evading the blow at the last moment.
As they passed each other, he swept Gentsu aside with his crimson blade.
His upper body severed, Gentsu vanished into the darkness without a scream.
“Suzaku Blade...” The boy looked down at his blade and let out a long breath.
“Feels like it's starting to fit my hand pretty well.”
Then the boy opened both eyes. The surrounding darkness was gone.
He was in the wooden-floored dojo of his familiar home.
A summer morning. Sunlight streamed in abundantly, and the sound of cicadas could be heard.
“...Not bad at all.” The voice belonged to the boy's grandfather.
Hououji Muyori, a deeply wrinkled giant seated in the dojo, fixed his gaze on his grandson. “Solo practice is good enough when you can do it like that.”
The boy, Hououji Daiga, also sat on the wooden floor.
The Crimson Blade was no longer in his hands.
It was all his mental training. But it wasn't mere fantasy.
Two months ago, Daiga had precisely recreated the fighting prowess of his opponent.
He had replicated everything—the distance, the techniques, the breathing patterns, even the tactical habits. This was the Hououji-style Martial Arts. The ancient method passed down by the Hououji family to cut through evil.
And he, Daiga Hououji, was the sole successor to this martial art.
“Inside me...” Daiga placed a hand over his heart.
“...I feel like the souls of those I've killed have taken up residence.”
“That's what taking a life means. Literally.” Slumping his legs, the Rogue Elder nodded.
“Don't just cut down a life. Absorb it. Like killing a beast and eating its flesh to grow.”
Still, the rogue chuckled. “You've learned some pretty ruthless moves. Your spacing isn't half bad either.”
“Thanks to having fought once.” Daiga snapped back to himself.
“I never knew what kind of enemy I was facing. That's why I was scared the first time I stood against a Demon. But now it's different. I fought the demon horde. And I learned their power.”
Two months had passed since then. Daiga had confronted the demon horde's power and dedicated himself to honing his skills. Right now, he can handle three at once.
“This is a fight for our lives. Lose, and we die. No mercy for the demon hordes.”
“That's right. Plus, we have to protect the girl.”
As the rogue spoke, hurried footsteps came from the main house.
“Grandpaaaa! Grandpaaaa! Breakfast is ready!”
A drawn-out girl's voice called out.

“Hey, hurry up! The miso soup's gonna get cold!”
Grandpa sighed, rising from the dojo. “She says she'll handle cooking during summer break... but yesterday? Miso soup with blue cheese floating in it. Only you'd ask for seconds on that.”
Daiga merely bowed once, regulating his breathing.
This morning too, he could hear her voice, safe and sound.
She was the very reason Daiga had become stronger.

Daiga sat on a bench in the Jingu Gakuen.
The vast grounds, home to the National Stadium, were unusually green for the city center. It bordered Aoyama Street, lined with high-end shops, and was also close to Shibuya and Harajuku.
In that quiet, tree-shaded spot, Daiga was reading a leather-bound book.
Brewster Litton's, The Coming Race.
It had been lent to him, deemed necessary for his battle.
“I see...” Two months ago, Daiga had been attacked for the first time by beings calling themselves the Demon Horde - and he learned that only the Hououji-style Martial Arts could oppose them.
He also learned his mother had been killed by the Demon Clan.
He realized the memories from that time had burned into his mind, becoming nightmares.
Yet Daiga had pushed aside his fear and driven the Demon Clan back.
Even so, the battle had only just begun.
They said there were one hundred and eight Demon Clan members, and they would surely return. Because the Demon Clan had a purpose, and their target was...
Thinking this, Daiga let out a heavy sigh.
“But why would they have tattoos like that...”
“Talking to yourself, Daiga?”
“Waaah!”
The voice from behind made Daiga nearly drop his book in panic.
“Hey, don't just barge in like that! What are you doing here?”
“Can't you tell? It's the soccer club's summer training.”
The one who said this flatly was a soccer club member from the same class.
Private Jingū Gakuen High School, General Studies, Class 2-A. That was Daiga's class.
The school was located in the outer grounds of the Meiji Shrine, and summer vacation had now begun. The familiar-faced soccer club member, trailing a junior behind him, kept shuffling his feet on the spot.
“It's no good for someone with your athletic ability reading books in broad daylight. How about it? Why not join us in working up a healthy sweat? And if you joined the soccer club, we'd be overjoyed—tears would well up in our eyes.”
“Hououji-senpai, please!”
A junior who looked more sumo wrestler than soccer player bowed, and Daiga grimaced.
“How many times do I have to say it? I hate sports.”
Everyone acknowledged Daiga's incredible athletic ability, but Daiga himself avoided all club activities, secretly devoting himself to martial arts training.

He could excel in any pro sport right now... Yet the reputation that he was a weirdo had already spread throughout the school.

“You're not seriously going to start studying for entrance exams now, Daiga. The J-League is waiting for you!”

“I'm the one waiting. Lorraine's here for summer training too, so I came to pick her up.”

Daiga pointed at the school building in front of them. It was the nurse school building of Jingū Gakuen, which offered a five-year integrated program for students aiming to become nurses.

But when they heard Daiga's words, the soccer club members' eyes flashed.

“What did you just say, Daiga! Lorraine-chan is at school too?!”

“Uh, yeah. Classes go until three, so she should be coming out soon...”

“Halt! Everyone, halt! One, two!”

With movements far quicker than before, the entire group stopped.

Sweaty excitement and anticipation now hung over the soccer club members.

“Senpai, does this mean we finally get to meet Lorraine-chan?”

“Don't get ahead of yourselves. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance the soccer gods have given us. It's the perfect opportunity for us, who usually attend different buildings, to ask Lorraine-chan directly!” A murmur of “Oh!” and a stifling heat rose.

Daiga closed his book and turned back to the soccer club.

“Listen, I'll say this now—if it's about that thing...”

“Shut up! Today, we're finally going to tell the angel of Jingū Academy—the one we've only ever watched from afar—how we feel! If we believe, then our wish will surely come true!” Facing his junior who nodded vigorously, the soccer club clenched his fist.

“We won't let the baseball or basketball clubs take her! We soccer players understand Lorraine-chan's beauty best. Look at this new cheerleader design as proof!”

Not just one, but every single member thrust their illustrations forward.

Surrounded by a swarm of pictures of beautiful girls, Daiga stumbled backward.

“You guys... never even met her, yet these drawings are weirdly good... And what's with those cat ears?! A shrine maiden, an Amimira member?! This is just cosplay...”

"No way! Kind-hearted Lorraine-chan would definitely wear our costumes! Everyone, line up in front of the nursing department gate! Prepare to bow down to Lorraine-chan!"

“Stop it, you're gonna embarrass the whole general studies department! Seriously, just play soccer, play soccer!”

“What do you mean!? This is the soccer club’s chance to shine! Let us go, Daiga!”

“No way I am letting you idiots go! Get out of the way, you first-years!”

“Hououji-senpai, I've always admired Lorraine-san!”

“Keep it at admiration! Just admiration! And you guys...”

Just then, as Daiga tried to restrain over a dozen soccer club members...

“Hehehe... What are you doing, Dai-chan?”

A pale pink summer uniform glistened in the sunlight.

Dazzlingly lustrous long golden hair. Her cobalt blue eyes reminded one of the midsummer sea. The petite girl smiled brightly, waving cheerfully.

The carefree smile made the soccer club members melt on the spot.
The owner of that smile was none other than Lorraine Rosenberg, Daiga's childhood friend and roommate.
“N-no, it's nothing, don't worry about it.” Silencing the soccer club, Daiga smiled.
He still couldn't bring himself to show his wild side around this girl.
“Just some guys from the regular course. They just happened to pass by during practice.”
“Well... practicing in this heat must be tough.” Lorraine smiled at the group.
“But please don't push yourselves too hard. It'd be terrible if someone collapsed.”
“Oh, Lorraine-chan!” The soccer club member even shed tears, shaking free of Daiga's hand. “Taking advantage of your kindness, I'd love to have this cheer... Guh!”
He only got that far before suddenly losing consciousness.
Laying the fallen man on the bench, Daiga shrugged.
“Looks like it really is heatstroke. Poor thing.”
“Senpai, pull yourself together!”
Ignoring the panicking club members, Daiga grabbed Lorraine's hand.
“Come on, let's head back. Everyone'll worry if we're late.”
“But... but the soccer club guys...”
“He'll wake up soon enough. Come on, let's go.”
As Daiga started walking briskly, someone lightly nudged his shoulder.
“Hey, don't forget I'm here too, okay?”
“Oh, right. You're here too, Ogawa?”
“Of course I am. I'm doing summer training too, you know.”
Daiga turned around. Next to Lorraine stood Ogawa Miki.
Short hair, defiant eyes.
Miki, a first-year nursing student like Lorraine, looked up at Daiga.
“Hey, hey, is it okay to use the Hououji Style Martial Arts recklessly?”
“What did you say?”
“But just now, from your finger to the soccer club guy... mmmph!”
Daiga hurriedly covered Miki's mouth.
Lorraine stared blankly at the two of them.
“What are you doing, Daiga? Miki-chan's face is bright red too.”
“N-no, nothing at all. Anyway, let's hurry home!”
Drag-like, Daiga rushed them into the shade of the trees.
Only after making sure no one was around did he finally release Miki.
“Guh... Hey, Daiga! Humans need fresh oxygen!”
“That's what you get for mentioning the Phoenix Style in public! Don't forget my power is supposed to be a secret!”
“Yeah, I know that, but...”
Miki was one of the few humans who knew Daiga and his clan's secret.
Because of that, she'd been dragged into their battles, and her best friend Lorraine had suffered. But now, she'd willingly offered to be Lorraine's bodyguard.
Bodyguard, though it just meant staying with her during class, was an incredibly generous offer to Daiga.
“Anyway, your power exists to protect Lorraine. You can't waste it.”

“What? You're here too?”
“Of course I am. I'm doing the summer internship too.”

“I know. I'm reflecting on it.”
“You really can't stand up to Miki-chan, can you, Dai-chan?”
Seeing Lorraine giggle softly, Daiga's heart ached.
Despite everything that happened, Lorraine's smile remained unchanged.
Of course, she must have worries, but she never showed even a glimpse of them to Daiga or Miki. Lorraine knew that if she worried, those around her would worry even more. Precisely because he understood that thoughtfulness, Daiga felt a pang of guilt.
“Well then, see you Monday, Lorraine.”
Miki seemed to sense it too, patting her best friend's shoulder.
“Summer training ends next week, so just one more push!”
“Yeah... Um, Miki-chan, the day after tomorrow...”
“See ya, Daiga! Take care of Lorraine!”
Miki waved and dashed down the sidewalk of the Jingu Gaien.
Daiga waved back... then suddenly looked down at Lorraine.
“Something happening the day after tomorrow, Sunday?”
“Yeah. It's Miki-chan's birthday.”
The two started walking toward Shinano-cho Station on the Chuo Line.
“August 9th... So, Daiga, can we make a little detour today?”
“Th-that... I can't.” Suppressing the pain in his heart, Daiga said.
“You want to buy me a present or something, right?”
“Yeah. I mean, I've caused Miki-chan all kinds of trouble, and she's been looking out for me since then too... Hey, please, Daiga! Today! Shinjuku! Just one hour!”
Lorraine clung to his arm, acting all sweet.
Daiga desperately steadied his wavering resolve.
“No, you can't. You're being targeted by the Demon Clan. School's okay, but stay home otherwise. If you get attacked in a crowded area, innocent people will get caught in the crossfire.”
“I guess... you're right. Yeah, I knew that.” Lorraine's face, bowed down, forced a smile.
It wasn't surprising she was acting so selfishly for once.
After all, since the incident two months ago, Lorraine had been under strict surveillance.
She was only permitted to travel between school and home, with Daiga serving as her escort. It was only natural she craved a distraction, but Daiga remained vigilant.
“You can't invite Miki over either. It’s too dangerous at the Hououji household. Just hang in there a little longer until things settle down.”
It was painful to demand more patience from Lorraine, who had already endured so much, but the blonde girl clung tightly to Daiga's arm.
“Yeah. If you say so, Daiga, I'll do it.”
She looked up at Daiga with clear eyes.
“But don't push yourself too hard either, Daiga. You're the one going through the hardest time.”
“I...” Daiga started to speak, then swallowed his breath.
Indeed, heavy mental strain weighed upon Daiga.

He never knew when or where demons might attack. Fear and vigilance left him no room for rest. Even so, she had no intention of taking her eyes off him.
He was the one who had saved her from the nightmare.

The Hououji residence stood in a quiet residential neighborhood in the city center.
Nezu. An old downtown area sandwiched between Ueno Park and the University of Tokyo. Having escaped redevelopment, it still carried the atmosphere of old Edo.
The mansion facing that ancient alley was Daiga's home.
Passing through the weathered gate, several men were busy working in the large garden.
They wore plain work clothes, but each had a sturdy build. And they were all foreigners.
One of them noticed Daiga and Lorraine returning home.
“Phoenix and First Lady, arrival. 1550 hours.”
The man announced into his intercom and bowed to Daiga.
Phoenix was Daiga's code name; First Lady was Lorraine's.
When the two reached the main house, the man in work clothes turned around again.
“Fifteen minutes past the scheduled time. Did something happen?”
“Various things. More importantly, what kind of construction is this today, Major Hadley?” Daiga addressed the tall British man.
“You're digging up a different spot again. What exactly are you planning to install?”
“I suppose I could explain it as an anti-nerve mine.”
British Army Major Richard Hadley smiled with his handsome features.
“It's a device that transmits harmful levels of electromagnetic waves into the nervous system. If unidentified brainwaves enter its effective radius, it activates and attacks the cerebrum. We concluded it should be effective against the undead.”
“You're putting that in the mansion's garden? That's rather alarming.”
"Electronic devices within the mansion have protective measures installed. They won't be affected. It's also programmed to recognize the residents' brainwaves, so don't worry about false triggers."
Daiga frowned at Hadley, who spoke with a hint of glee.
“Surveillance tactical AI, lovely micro-machines, and now anti-nerve landmines? Quite the parade of cutting-edge weapons. You planning to turn my place into a weapons exhibition hall?”
“But even with this, I wonder if we can protect Lorraine.”
Major Hadley and the men in work clothes are soldiers known as Team Ascalon.
Originally, they were the cream of the crop, gathered from special forces units across nations - now they’re aligned with the Ziegen Agency, tasked with guarding Lorraine and exterminating demon hordes - but the team, which had a strength of sixteen, was halved in a battle two months ago.
Commander Hadley and the surviving members now reside at the Hououji residence.
Sitting on the veranda as if it were his own home, Hadley sipped chilled barley tea.
“We obtained data on the demon hordes during the last battle. The results were sent to the Ziegen Institute's Equipment Research Headquarters, but no significant breakthroughs have been achieved yet.”
Daiga and Lorraine joined him on the veranda, observing the work in progress.

“What about funding for that?”
“It's being poured in. All the UN Security Council permanent members are cooperating. Every country wants anti-demon horde weapons. Anyway, demon research has only just begun.”
Hadley cleared his throat, and Lorraine picked up her barley tea glass with both hands.
“Somehow... this is getting bigger and bigger, and I...” Daiga deliberately ruffled the confused blonde's hair roughly.
“It's fine. Don't worry about Lorraine.”
“Yeah. I just got a little concerned.”
Studying the fortress-like layout diagram, Hadley pinched his chin.
"Anyway. We'll do everything we can to protect Lorraine. That's our mission. We'll fortify the defenses as much as possible given the current situation. There's no such thing as overdoing it."
“Tch. And you tried to abandon Lorraine last time.”
“Even if I gave the same order now, no one would follow it. Look.”
Hadley pointed, and the battle-hardened special forces members were grinning broadly.
Waving back at them was Lorraine. After two months sharing meals and lodging in this mansion, they seemed to have become quite close.
Though, to be fair, not a single brave soul dared touch Lorraine's cooking.
“We're doing our best too, Daiga. To protect her.”
Hadley's words made Daiga finish his barley tea in one gulp.
If those words were true, that would be good. But if Lorraine...
Then, suddenly, a deep, booming laugh sounded from behind them.
“But hey, Hadley. You still haven't figured out the demon horde's movements, have you?”
“Muyori-san...”
Hououji Muyori waved his fan and scanned the garden.
“Their base is in South America. Have you heard anything from them?”
“Not a thing...”
Hadley bowed his head, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

“Besides us, Team Ascalon, other anti-demon combat teams are active, but we've received no reports.”

“They also learned there are two Hououji Style practitioners. And it's been two months. That should be plenty of time to prepare their scheme. If they're going to move, it'll be soon.”

Team Ascalon also stopped their work and gathered on the veranda.

Lorraine looked at the old rogue sitting cross-legged with anxious eyes.

“So Grandpa, the Demon Clan will come for me again...”

“Right. That's the question. Will they come for Lorraine first, or...”

Daiga understood and scratched his head.

“Kill us Hououji Style practitioners first, huh?”
“That's the idea. Well, if I were a demon, I'd kill Daiga first.”
After Lorraine poured him barley tea, the rogue said.
“Once Daiga and I are dead, there'll be no one left to protect Lorraine. Kill us with all your might, then do as you please.”
“That's... Grandpa, stop saying such strange things!”
“You can't fight without knowing your enemy, Lorraine. There's no helping it.”
Grinning, the aged giant shook his shoulders.
“The question is how they'll come to kill us. To find that out, we need the Demon Clan's intel. Tell Walter to hurry up and find out where Borman is.”
Walter von Dietrich. A colonel in the German Federal Army and a high-ranking member of the Siegen Agency. He, right now in South America, was Daiga's father.
But since leaving the young Daiga in the care of the reckless old man, he had never seen his son again. Even after Daiga finally fought the demon horde, there was no sign of him coming to visit. To the boy, his father was an almost non-existent presence.
“...Martin Bormann?” Daiga murmured the enemy's name, as if to forget his own pent-up frustration.
The shadow emperor of the Nazi Party who wielded immense power during World War II.
He escaped the chaos of Berlin's fall and evaded the hunt for war criminals, fleeing to South America.
And now, at 120 years old, he still lived on as a demonic entity, targeting Lorraine.
It was also Borman's scheme that sent the demonic entity Gentsu to kill Daiga's mother, Misuzu. But how did Borman acquire the power of the demonic entities?
Was there no weakness to that power? There were far too many mysteries.
And then there was the matter of Lorraine - recently, Daiga had been trying to grasp at least some clue...
“Ah, right. I'll return the book, Hadley.”
“‘The Coming Race,’ huh? Pretty interesting read, I suppose.”
When Daiga pulled out the book, Lorraine tilted her head.
“Looks like a pretty old book!
“First edition was 1871. Author is Bulwer-Lytton. British novelist. The guy who coined ‘The pen is mightier than the sword,’ you know?” Daiga answered without hesitation.
“The story's about the Earth's core being hollow, and a mysterious race living in that subterranean world.”
“Huh, so it's an ancient sci-fi novel.”
“And that race wields a power called Vril, granting them immortality and the ability to destroy at will.”
“Th-that... could it be... ...!”
It might be the Demon Clan. Daiga had read it thinking the same thing.
But the more intriguing fact lay beyond that.
"The problem is, Adolf Hitler read this book. Hitler believed in the existence of this underground world and thought the mysterious race was one and the same as the

Germanic people. He believed that in the future, it would be the Germanic race—as the chosen people—who would conquer the world using psychic powers. You could say the Nazi atrocities began with this book. Though, to be fair, there were others who also planted those ideas in Hitler's head..."

“Carl Haushofer. Professor of Geopolitics at the University of Munich.” Hadley continued smoothly.

“Haushofer was a member of the occult secret society, the Rozenkreutzians. He lent this book to Hitler. And he was the man who even organized an expedition to discover the subterranean world.”

“But, but that's...” Lorraine looked down at her feet, flustered.

“There's no way the Earth is hollow inside. That book is fiction, right?”

“But Lorraine, the Nazis even created an Occult Bureau. They sent scientists to Antarctica and Tibet to find the entrance to the subterranean world. And the name of that Occult Bureau... was the Legacy of the Ancients.”

Lorraine gasped, swallowing hard.

“Could it be related to the Legacy Gate... the one the Demon Clan used?”

“That's the only conclusion I can draw. And listen, Hadley—”

Daiga pulled out another suspicious-looking book.

“A book I found in the school library said there's a Borman base in Antarctica. Apparently, there's a huge hole in Antarctica leading to the subterranean world. They say Borman is hiding UFOs and his base down there.”

“Hold on. Let me see that book.” Hadley snatched the book and stifled a laugh.

“Junji Yajima's ‘I Discovered a Nazi UFO Base!’? You don't need to read such a dubious book. It'll only confuse you.”

“Huh? This book is fake?”

"It's what they call a ‘tondemo book’. Relax. Antarctica was thoroughly surveyed decades ago. There are no holes leading underground, and certainly no Nazi UFO base."

“What the hell? I thought I'd finally found a good book.”

Speaking discontentedly, Daiga suddenly looked up.

The Ascalon members were smiling happily for some reason.

“What? What's so funny?”

“Nothing, it's just truly wonderful. You've finally joined our ranks.”

Someone said, and the Ascalon members even clapped.

“We were the same when we first took this mission.”

“Yeah. All the occult books in the world start looking like the truth. It's an occupational hazard.” Hadley stifled a laugh too.

“It'll be confusing at first. Fiction and reality get mixed up. To deal with this unreal situation, you need to think for yourself.”

“What the hell... I read it pretty seriously, you know. There's a lot more...”

Daiga rummaged through the bag containing the documents he'd read.

But Lorraine was already engrossed in reading its contents.

"Oh my god, Dai-chan! They say crop circles are Nazi work too!"

“Look, Lorraine, about what you just said...”

“President Kennedy's death, the space shuttle crash, cows having their blood drained—it might all be the Demon Clan's doing! What should we do?!” Daiga grimaced in exasperation.
"This is bad. She totally believes it. Lorraine is too pure-hearted. What should we do?"
“But you still can't tell fact from fiction either, can you?”
“Well, yeah. The very existence of the Demon Clan is absurd to begin with. If you accept them as real, any fishy story starts sounding like the truth.”
Then Daiga turned to his grandfather. “You thought that too, didn't you, Grandpa?”
“You idiot. Like I'd read any of that research!” Before anyone noticed, he'd poured sake into his teacup and was gulping it down with reckless abandon.
“Looking into it just leads to confusion. I get the facts straight from Walter. That's all.”
“But then that means...”
“The truth is only what's right in front of you. Just accept it.”
The old rogue finished his drink with relish. “When we meet a man, we cut him down. When we meet a Buddha, we cut him down. That's our job.”
“When we meet a demon horde... we cut them down too...”
True, Daiga's role was to fight. Not to investigate.
But there was something Daiga desperately needed to know.
As if reading his thoughts, a young woman's voice rang out.
“No way. Daiga hasn't reached that level of detachment yet.”
“Reiko...”
“That's why you're so desperate, right?”
Sakimizu Reiko had entered the garden unnoticed.
Shading her eyes from the strong sunlight, she approached with a brisk stride.
“You want to know how to save Lorraine, don't you?”
“Well... yeah.”
Daiga looked at Lorraine, who cast her eyes down in turn.
The demonic horde was being attracted to the mark engraved upon Lorraine.
He didn't know why this had happened, but he desperately wanted to remove it for her.
“I've read countless books, but there's no mention or information about it anywhere.”
Daiga said in a voice that sounded stumped.
“I can't even find a single clue. Reiko, has the Ziegen Institute discovered anything?”
“Nothing. Information on the Demon Horde is scarce to begin with, but regarding the tattoos, the only clues are the words and actions of the Demon Horde members themselves.”
Daiga recalled the deadly battle two months prior.
“If we are bound, the gate to the beyond will open… This one is the gate itself. And I am the key… You have been chosen. For the tattoo.”
Lorraine had been attacked by the Demon Horde twice—once at age two, and again now at fifteen.
Daiga's father had once faked Lorraine's death, but that too had been uncovered.
But why target Lorraine so relentlessly?
“Sakimizu-san, I...”
Lorraine stood with a pained expression, and Reiko crossed her arms.

“I understand. We still need to examine your body. The Ziegen Agency also needs to - and we've been notified that an investigation team is being dispatched to Japan.”
“When?”
“They've already left San Diego. They'll arrive at Yokohama Port tomorrow.”
Reiko's answer made Daiga frown. “That's very sudden.”
“The dispatch was decided long ago. We just didn't tell you. We wanted to keep the information hidden until the last minute so the Demon Horde wouldn't sense our movements.” Reiko swept her lustrous black hair back.
“They'll be arriving in Japan aboard the research vessel Critias, owned by the Ziegen Agency. Dr. Albert Grant, an expert in demon biology, is in charge. The ship is equipped with a demon research facility, so we'll be able to examine Lorraine's body there.”
Daiga quietly rose from the veranda. “There's something in Lorraine's body that the demonic hordes are after.”
He slowly glared at Reiko with a cold stare. “That information should be coveted not only by your Ziegen Agency, but by governments around the world. You're not seriously going to use Lorraine's body as experimental material for demonic horde research, are you?”
“I'd like to do that, if possible.” Reiko stated it with a cool expression.
“But rest assured. The fact that a tattoo was carved into Lorraine's body is still a secret confined within the Ziegen Agency. Even while explaining the incident to the Japanese government today I glossed over it.”
“Really?”
“I wouldn't lie, Daiga.”
Hadley also sat up and nodded firmly.
“Why do you think we delayed explaining this to the governments so long? We were reviewing and editing the footage from the last battle. The parts showing Lorraine have been deleted and altered.”
“In fact, Lorraine's information is treated as top secret even within the Ziegen Agency. Only a few senior staff know about it. It's too early to release details about her.”
Reiko sat beside Lorraine and smiled.
“Governments worldwide are terrified of the Demon Horde's existence. But knowing the Hōōji clan exists gives them some peace of mind. At least they know there's a way to repel them.”
“But if they find out the Demon Horde attacked me specifically... what will the Japanese government do?”
When Lorraine asked, Reiko sighed. “Please don't make me say it.”
Daiga could imagine what was coming. A request to leave the country. Of course, no other nation would accept Lorraine.
That alone would be bad enough. In the worst case, erasure of her very existence.
And if the information spread to the public?
A mob terrified by the demon horde might very well attack Lorraine.
If only Lorraine were gone... Just someone thinking that could start a catastrophe.
A sight far more terrifying than the demon horde's arrival.

“Well, it's still fine for now. Nations won't be pushing you off onto each other, or fighting to take you. Before it gets to that point, you'll let me investigate, right?”
“Yes. I... I wanted that too.” Lorraine said this, gazing at Daiga.
“Dai-chan, you've always worried about me... I just wanted to put your mind at ease sooner.”
Daiga felt pathetic. His concern for Lorraine was only making her more anxious.
Realizing his own helplessness, Daiga scratched the back of his neck.
“So, it's okay then. Lorraine?”
“Yeah. It's fine. Don't worry, don't worry. It's just like a health checkup.” The girl answered with her usual smile. “Besides, it's just been back and forth between home and school forever. I'm kinda bored. If I can go to Yokohama tomorrow, I'm actually looking forward to it.”
“Hey... this isn't a vacation, you know.” Daiga's words lightened the mood that had been sinking.
Reiko gently took Lorraine's hand.
“So since we're going on a trip tomorrow for the first time in ages, let me get ready in your room.”
“Understood. Dai-chan, dinner...”
“Yeah. I'll make it. It's been a while.”
Quiet cheers rose from Team Ascalon.
Unaware of this, Lorraine disappeared into the depths of the main house.
Daiga sat back down on the veranda and gazed up at the August evening sky.
“My training's not enough, is it?”
“Of course not. That girl sees right through your worries.” Muyori poured more sake, exasperated.
“That's why you're going to her. It's a bit late to say it now, but she's a good kid.”
No one disagreed with those words.
That was precisely why it felt so painful. The fact he couldn't be of help to her.

“Then could you take off just the top?”
At Reiko's request, Lorraine removed her summer blouse.
She folded it on the bed and shyly covered her chest.
Meanwhile, Reiko took out a needle-free syringe resembling a pistol.
“Don't worry, it won't hurt.”
“Y-yes.”
“I'm just injecting harmless tracking ink. The ink turns into pseudo-micromachines that constantly send signals back to us.”
Reiko checked the trigger with her finger as she spoke.
“No matter where they take you, as long as I spray this on you, you'll be fine.”
“Yes... is my arm okay?”
Lorraine timidly offered her left arm. It was then.
“Ugh...” Reiko stopped her hand involuntarily, gasping.
An eerie tattoo had appeared on Lorraine's arm.
Long hair bristling, the voluptuous woman's naked form leapt into view.

Her limbs appeared on Lorraine's skin, as if to block the syringe.
And it wasn't just a tattoo.
Her lips breathed, and with each breath, her pink skin grew more vivid and lustrous.
Her gaze fixed on the syringe held anger, even growling at Reiko.
It was alive. Lorraine's tattoo was definitely alive.
“Seems you don't like this injection, huh?”
As Reiko suppressed her unease, Lorraine's expression also clouded over.
“It doesn't usually move much.”
Saying this, Lorraine tapped the tattoo lightly with her index finger.
Then the tattooed woman changed direction, as if turning in water.
She continued up Lorraine's arm, stopping near her shoulder.
Reiko couldn't help but gasp. “Wait a minute, you're not going to...”
“No, it's not like we're communicating.”
Lorraine stroked her own skin and smiled.
“But now it listens to me when I tell it to do things like this. I don't know why, though...”
Reiko set down the syringe and stared intently at the tattoo. Then she turned the face of her wristwatch toward it. The watch, equipped with a scanning function, instantly measured the tattoo's surface area.
"It's expanded seven percent compared to a week ago. The data from the week before that showed a five percent increase. It's growing slowly, but the pace is accelerating."
Reiko looked into the girl's eyes.
“Have you told Daiga about this...?”
“No. Not even Grandpa...” Then Lorraine took Reiko's hand.
“Please, don't tell Dai-chan yet that the tattoo is getting bigger.”
“That's fine, but eventually...”
“I don't want to worry Dai-chan any more than this. So...”
Her pleading eyes glistened and trembled.
Reiko bit her lip and pulled Lorraine's shoulders close.
“I understand. But be prepared. No matter how much Daiga suffers...”
“I'm sorry, Reiko-san...” The girl buried her face in Reiko's chest.

All I can do now is hold it close.

It was a summer afternoon when everyone felt their own helplessness.
The strong sunlight glistened on the waves of Yokohama. Opened to trade during the turbulent Bakumatsu period, Yokohama Port remains one of Japan's foremost international trade ports. While commercial and industrial zones dominate most of the port, its passenger terminals are by no means small. The Ōsanbashi International Passenger Terminal, jutting out into the sea, was the prime example. Its exterior, featuring an immigration lobby and large hall at its center, could even be called elegant.
“Which one is it, Hadley? That Critias?”
Daiga stepped out of the car and yawned widely toward the terminal.
“It's the ship with the spherical radar. Docked over there.”

Major Hadley, who followed him out, was dressed in a suit despite the heat.
He wore dark sunglasses and grimaced at the humidity rising from the sea.
“It's a mobile research facility for the Ziegen Engine. You could call it a hunk of high tech.”
The rest of Team Ascalon, arriving in scattered order, were also all dressed in suits. Fully armed, yet concealed. Weapons and communication devices were cleverly hidden. Each gun they carried was loaded with freeze rounds effective against the undead. Naturally, weapons were also stashed throughout the three 4WDs they arrived in.
Lorraine finally peered out from one of them. “Um... is it safe to get out now?”
“All clear. First Lady, this way please.”
Hadley confirmed it was safe, and Lorraine took a deep breath of the sea breeze.
Reiko, following behind, gazed at the Yokohama Bay Bridge and sighed.
“Yokohama on a Saturday, huh...”
“Honestly, this isn't the place you come to for a health checkup.”
Standing beside Daiga, Lorraine was breathing in the fresh sea air.
“It really feels good. Grandpa should have come too.”
“Grandpa hates tests and stuff like that. He's over eighty and still that energetic. If the scientists at the Ziegen Institute saw him, they'd definitely want to examine him thoroughly.”
But Daiga understood why the reckless old man really hadn't come - the wounds he'd suffered in the battle two months ago probably hadn't healed yet.
Hououji-style martial arts practictioners possessed a self-healing ability called Kappo - for a master like Muyori, its effects should be potent, but age is age. It was only natural his recovery might lag. Not letting others see it was likely a matter of pride.
“Every last one of them is stubborn as hell...” Daiga muttered under his breath.
They all seemed to be opening up to each other, yet not a single one spoke their true feelings. Everyone carried their own worries and suffering, trying desperately not to show it.
Was it consideration for others, or just pointless bravado? Probably both.
Daiga glanced at Yamashita Park, bustling with families and couples.
“Anyway, forget about playing around. Lorraine and I are right in the middle of summer vacation, you know. We're here because we're putting up with it. You should be patient and stick with us too, Reiko.”
“Oh dear, she doesn't look like she's putting up with anything, does she?”
Hearing this, Daiga turned back to Lorraine.
The blonde girl was already swaying as if guided, starting to walk toward Yokohama city.
“Hey, Lorraine, you can't just wander off like that.”
“But Dai-chan, I can smell that delicious curry all the way over here!”
“No way! Even if the Curry Museum is close...”
“Hey, did you know? They have a limited summer menu right now. Like watermelon curry and ice azuki bean curry. Miki-chan told me.”
“Ugh, that's totally your kind of place.”

Lorraine smiled happily and grabbed Daiga's hand. "So, let's eat there before your exam, okay? After that, we'll buy some cosmo balls. Then I kinda wanna go to Cosmo World."
“Hold on, you’ll be late to the check-up then…”
But Lorraine seemed completely distracted.
"We'll get Miki-chan's birthday present in Kannai. I wanna ride like three coasters, then grab tons of stuffed animals at the crane games - and when night falls, we'll ride the Ferris wheel. Sounds good, Daiga-chan?"
Staring into those blue eyes, the night view of Yokohama flashed through Daiga's mind.
He hadn't been to an amusement park in ages. Eating dinner in Chinatown at night sounded nice too. “Yeah, let's do that. So then, starting now...”
“Hey, Daiga! What are you thinking?” Reiko forcefully yanked Daiga back by the collar.
“You guys've been under house arrest for a while, so you've got this urge to play. Get a grip.”
“R-right. Damn, damn.” Daiga slapped his own cheeks, which had started to slack, and pulled himself together. “That's how it is, Lorraine. We'll come play another time.”
“Y-yeah... Oh! There are so many seagulls at Yamashita Park! I wanna feed them!”
“Hey, wait up, Lorraine! You're acting weird today!” The others scrambled to chase after the girl dashing down the pier.
For this moment only, they blended into the peaceful Saturday scene.
But unseen eyes watched them. “That's Lorraine Rosenberg...”
The man twisted a sly smile and took a drag on his cigarette.
He lifted his round sunglasses slightly, fixing his gaze on Daiga.
“And the successor to the Hououji Style. Let’s see just how skilled you are.”
His eyes were certainly not that of a human.

“Welcome aboard the Critias. I am Judith Ramsey, captain of this vessel.”
The hand extended belonged, surprisingly, to a woman.
Around thirty years old. Navy blue uniform. Short blonde hair neatly tucked away.
Standing over 180 centimeters tall with an imposing, resolute posture, she slightly intimidated Daiga.
“This ship's a research vessel, right? Why's a military officer commanding it?”
“You’re quite observant, Hououji-san.”
“You walk just like Hadley. And drop the ‘san’ already.”
Hadley chuckled softly at Daiga's annoyed expression.
“The captain holds the rank of Commander in the Royal Navy. She served as Executive Officer aboard the aircraft carrier Princess of Wales. Her command skills are such that she defeated the U.S. Atlantic Fleet during a joint Anglo-American exercise. That's why we recruited her for the Ziegen Agency.”
Daiga noticed the connection plug in the captain's neck. He knew about direct cybernetic interfaces, but human augmentation technology wasn't ethically accepted.
He'd heard it was being tested on some military personnel, but this was his first time seeing it. Captain Ramsey, however, paid no mind to Daiga's gaze.

“Even within the same British Empire, I find it rather disappointing that you walk like the Army.” Then he shifted his gentle gaze to the girl.
The captain shook hands with Hadley and Reiko, as if they were old acquaintances.
“And you are...”
“I am Lorraine Rosenberg” Grasping her small hand, the captain's emerald eyes sparkled.
“Welcome aboard, Miss Lorraine. This ship came all the way to Japan for you.”
The group boarded the Critias under Captain Ramsey's guidance.
Externally, it was an elegant luxury liner, but internally, its structure was peculiar.
Countless bulkheads lined the passageways, revealing a system capable of sealing off sections into cube-shaped compartments. There must be some purpose to this, but Daiga waited for the captain's explanation.
“Length: 203 meters. Beam: 30 meters. Displacement: 25,000 tons.”
Captain Ramsey advanced, her footsteps echoing sharply down the corridor.
“The crew, including researchers and marines, numbers about 1,000. It's a research vessel, but also the Ziegen Institute's premier mobile base. It's fully equipped for combat.”
“Vertical launch multi-purpose missile systems are mounted fore and aft.”
Major Hadley added, walking ahead of the captain.
"It can fire sixty AI-guided missiles per minute. Six VTOL fighters are stored beneath the aft deck. Furthermore, the entire hull employs a new material that absorbs and deflects radar waves. The spherical radar performs electronic jamming and distorts incoming missile trajectories. Its power plant is fusion-based. Cruising speed is 28 knots. This ship's combat capability rivals that of a light aircraft carrier."
“You seem strangely pleased when explaining weapons.”
Daiga said, glancing at Captain Ramsey's nape. Probably because operating this research vessel requires direct cybernetic connection.
Noticing his gaze, the captain turned to Daiga.
“Speaking of weapons, we're also developing anti-demon weapons onboard. We have several prototypes stored here. I'll have someone explain them to you later.”
Daiga remained silent, scanning the ship's interior. The crew members passing by were all scientists or military personnel.
The unusually clean walls reinforced the impression of a cold, clinical research facility.
In fact, Lorraine was still clinging to Daiga's arm.
“Hey, Dai-chan... I guess I'm still a little scared.” She squeezed him tighter.
“Even though I'm supposed to be a nurse in training. I know it's just a check-up, but...”
“It'll be fine. I'm here. I won't let them do anything weird to you.”
But Daiga's tension gradually grew.
Hadley said to trust him, but Lorraine remained invaluable.
If her death could eliminate the threat of the demon horde, the Ziegen Institute would carry it out without hesitation.
In the laboratory—a sealed chamber—her elimination was possible.
He would not take his eyes off Lorraine for a single moment.
Just as Daiga made that vow, Hadley stopped in front of a thick door.
“Dr. Grant... Team Ascalon, Richard Hadley here.”

“Ah, come in!” Hadley spoke into the palm print intercom, and a high-pitched voice answered. The door opened immediately, revealing a spacious laboratory.
Countless monitors lined the walls, each simultaneously processing different research projects.
On the right monitor, Daiga was deciphering the familiar demonic script, while on the left, a 3D reconstruction of the demonic entity Gentsu's final moments was being analyzed, gradually revealing the process of its vaporization.
In front of them sat a bizarre composite of a desk, chair, and terminal.
Dozens of wired terminals dangled from it, evoking the image of a torture device.
But what caught Daiga's eye was the enormous glass box placed in the center of the room. The scene unfolding inside left Lorraine speechless.
“Dai-chan, this...” The transparent box, made of reinforced glass, stood two meters tall and covered an area roughly equivalent to four and a half tatami mats.
Inside was an exquisitely crafted diorama of an ice field.
Hills, frozen rivers, coniferous forests, even powdery snow falling.
And striding across that snowy plain were countless tiny creatures.
Daiga immediately recognized a herd of woolly mammoths.
Beside them, deer and rhinos with bizarre horns also walked.
Further down the hillside, ancient people could be seen tending fires before caves.
“Are these... alive?”
“No, they're thinking robots. Scale is 1/35. Environmental control is computerized. It recreates Europe during the so-called Würm Glacial Period, 20,000 years ago.”
A man in a white coat appeared from beyond the glass case.
Late forties. Strongly textured hair grown out casually, gold-rimmed glasses on his eyes.
A socket for cybernetic connection was also in the nape of his neck.
“Carbon from this era was detected in the traces of the demon horde. Don't you find it interesting that the undead are weak to freezing, yet the demon horde left traces from the glacial period?”
“And you built this miniature garden to learn something from it?”
"No. This is merely a catalyst to inspire my thinking. I thought it might spark some good ideas. After all, my main profession is paleontology. Lately, labs have become so computerized and sterile, so I made this thing for a change of pace. By the way..."
The man narrowed his eyes and looked back and forth between Daiga and Lorraine.
“So, it's finally time for us to meet. You are Phoenix, codename Daiga Hououji. And you are the First Lady, Miss Lorraine.”
“And you are...”
“I'm in charge of the anti-demon research facility aboard the ship. My specialty is paleontological ecology. I'm Albert Grant. Pleased to meet you.”
With that, the doctor took Lorraine's hands in his own.
Noticing the unexpected gentleness in his eyes, Lorraine's cheeks broke into a smile.
“The pleasure is mine, Dr. Grant.”
“I'm sure you're anxious. But I'm glad you came. Seeing it for yourselves is the best way to solve this.” Daiga wanted to believe that too. He quietly crossed his arms.
“Your specialty seems to be mammoths, but Lorraine is human.”

“I understand. I won't treat her like a fossil or a monster. I intend to treat her with the utmost respect. Anyway, let's go to Studio One. Sykes, get ready!”
“Yes, Dr. Grant!”
Then, another door opened at the back, and another person appeared.
He had plump cheeks and a round body. Dr. Grant beckoned to the young man in the strangely dirty white coat.
“Let me introduce you. This is Charlie Sykes, my assistant. He boasts an appetite like a saber-toothed tiger and the digestive power of a badger. And yet, he's a young genius in biotechnology.”
“That's reassuring.” Daiga frowned and shook hands with Sykes.
Next, Lorraine extended her supple fingers.
"My name is Lorraine Rosenberg. Nice to meet you."
“Ah... ah, ah! I, I'm delighted to meet you!”
Sykes seemed to have just noticed her and was strangely intimidated.
Dr. Grant looked exasperated at his dullness.
“You know, it's frighteningly insensitive of you not to notice such a beautiful person entering this dreary room. Is your eyesight on par with a star-nosed mole?”
“Yes, I’m sorry.” But his face was flushed bright red, and he was staring at Lorraine in an oddly intense way.
Lorraine noticed the gaze and looked back at Assistant Sykes. “Uh... Is something wrong?”
“N-no, nothing... Well, the real thing is much cuter, after all.”
Daiga felt uneasy about Sykes's puzzling words and actions.
“Have you seen Lorraine somewhere before?”
“Well, there's a little something about that. Actually, it's hard to talk about with her.”
Dr. Grant lowered his voice unnaturally. “I'll tell you about it sometime, Daiga. It's unpleasant news for you, though.”
Lorraine tilted her head slightly and looked at the doctor.
The two scientists looked strangely apologetic.

The room called Studio One was divided into two rooms: the scanner room and the control room. The two rooms were separated by glass walls, making it look exactly like a recording studio. A huge scanning device was installed in the scanner room, surrounded by auxiliary robotic arms. The atmosphere was strangely solemn.
“That high-sensitivity scanner injects nanomachines into the human body. It will surely reveal the true nature of the tattoo. Please wait a moment while Miss Lorraine changes.” It was a so-called will management system, known as a control shell.
Upon hearing this, Daiga looked at Dr. Grant, who was seated in a chair.
The chair in the control room doubled as the control terminal for Studio 1 - directly connected to the computer network, the doctor gave instructions to the entire studio without moving a finger or uttering a word, simultaneously moving multiple robotic arms.
Assistant Sykes sat at the auxiliary control console, while Hadley and the others sat on the sofa behind him.

Feeling nervous at the sight of the flashing control panel, Daiga cleared his throat.
“Any progress on the demon research?”
“I know you're dissatisfied, but please understand - the Demon Swarm is a lifeform far beyond our comprehension. We won't discover its weaknesses in just two months or so.” Grant, the operator, said curtly.
“You should know this from actually fighting them. They're a group called the Demon Horde, but each individual has completely different abilities and lifestyles. There's no other creature like that.”
“So you're saying it's hard to find a common weakness?”
“Exactly. However, they do have something in common. That is, they choose human bodies as hosts and live by parasitizing them” Dr. Grant continued, almost singing.
“Without a host body, a Demon cannot exert its power. So how do we prevent them from approaching human bodies, or expel them from those bodies? That is our current research topic.”
What Daiga wanted to know was how to expel the tattoo from Lorraine.
But could it even be expelled in the first place?
Without examining the tattoo, there would be no answer.
“Your specialty is ancient organisms, right? So why are you researching Demons?” Grant smiled faintly at Daiga's new question.
“When inferring the ecology of ancient organisms, physical evidence is extremely scarce. What can be extracted from fossils is limited. Even so, I've achieved significant results. It's the same with the Demons. We need to find whatever scant evidence or weaknesses exist. That's precisely why my methods and abilities were required.”
At that moment, the door at the back of the scanner room opened.
Lorraine, changed into surgical scrubs, entered timidly.
The girl sat down at the scanner and noticed Daiga on the other side of the glass.
She smiled and waved, though her face was a little stiff.
“Even so, you guys have been a big help.” Grant continued the conversation.
"Major Hadley was the first to get us physical evidence of the Demon Horde. He's sharp. Of course, we have the combat footage, and the rainbow-colored bodily fluids and black vapor emitted by the demonic hordes are in my lab."
Daiga glanced back at the sofa behind him.
Major Hadley sat with his long legs crossed, his eyes narrowed.
“As our research on the demonic hordes progresses, Lorraine will be saved. If we can analyze Lorraine's tattoos, we can defeat the demonic hordes. We believe that.”
“Don't be nervous, Daiga. Calm down a little.” With that said, Reiko handed him a soft drink. As Daiga drank the cold carbonated beverage, the Doctor finally sat down at the control console.
“Rest assured, Daiga-kun. We have the most physical evidence regarding her. The demon horde left only fragments, but her tattoos can be examined from corner to corner. For me, it's research material that's almost too luxurious. Oh, my apologies.”
Noticing Daiga's anger, the Doctor put on his scanning goggles.
“We've also been shown footage from two months ago. ...Sykes?”
“Yes, here you go.” Sykes deftly flicked the control keys.

A grainy 3D image appeared on the largest monitor.
In that instant, Daiga spat out the soda he'd been drinking.
“You... you bastard! Stop that video!” He shouted, covering Sykes' eyes with his hands.
What played was indeed the combat record against the Celestial Demon Gentsu.
Daiga wielded the Phoenix Blade, facing off against the demon, but of course, the captive Lorraine was also shown. The problem was that Lorraine was completely naked.
“Hadley, what the hell is this video?!”
“Why are you so shocked? You were there too, weren't you?”
“That's not the point! You said you erased Lorraine's footage from the video!”
“Oh, that,” Reiko raised an eyebrow.

“It's true that the video provided to the governments has been edited. But in order to analyze the tattoo, we gave Dr. Grant the unedited video of Lorraine. It couldn't be helped.”

“It couldn't be helped?!” Daiga pressed the struggling Sykes against the control panel, trying to somehow hide Lorraine's embarrassing appearance. But Lorraine could see everything through the glass.
She became agitated. “Dai-chan, is something wrong?”
A girl's voice came through the speaker.
“You seem strange. What do you mean by ‘my naked video’?”
Apparently, the audio from each other's rooms was perfectly clear.
Daiga's expression twitched at Lorraine's bewildered look.
“N-nothing. The inspection will start soon.”
Daiga finally found the stop button and erased the image.
“...Man, you really make me panic.”
Daiga felt a momentary relief, then immediately twisted Sykes' chest up.
“Oh, now I get it. You've never met Lorraine before, but you knew her face from this video, huh?”
“Guh, guh... Well, yeah, that's true...”
“Damn it, so you were all admiring that... I bet you were imagining all kinds of things when you saw the real Lorraine earlier!”
“It's a misunderstanding, Hououji-san!”
Captain Ramsey was stunned, and Reiko was utterly exasperated.
Only Dr. Grant remained strangely calm.
“I see. I've confirmed Daiga-kun's feelings for Miss Lorraine. It was precisely because of this desperation that he was able to defeat the demon. It's worthy of respect.”
“I don't know about that. From my perspective, it's just jealousy.”
Hadley said, pinching his chin.
“Of course, if jealousy can defeat a demon horde, then it's something to be welcomed.”
“I understand not wanting to show it.” Indeed, he didn't want to show Lorraine naked. But more than that, he didn't want to show her tattoo.
Lorraine never usually mentioned the tattoo.
That's why he knew she was hiding her pain.
When Daiga calmed down, Dr. Grant nodded slightly.
“Now then, Ms. Lorraine, would you show us that thing?”
“Yes, Dr. Grant.”
Lorraine obediently rolled up the sleeves of her surgical gown.
She turned her fist upward, exposing her thin arm to the control room.
Something like a black birthmark writhed on her white skin.
“Sykes. Enlarge it on monitor six.”
The enlarged image appeared on the main screen.
A bewitching naked woman. A voluptuous body dancing on her skin.
For the first time in a long while, Daiga faced that wicked gaze.
What on earth was this thing on Lorraine's body...
Before he knew it, his thoughts had made him clench his fists.
But in the next instant, a strange sensation ran through Daiga's entire body. “...Ugh!”
He choked back a scream.
The moment he locked eyes with the tattooed woman through the screen, it reached him.

A shrill, raucous female cackle. The sound of someone mercilessly toying with the weak pierced Daiga's ears. That laughter pierced his eardrums and clutched his heart.
A searing pain tore through his heart as if it were being ripped from his lungs.
He tried to cover his ears, tried to look away, but his rigid body wouldn't move.
Yet beside him, Hadley and Reiko were calmly preparing for the examination.
Only Daiga was being assaulted by the mockery, cold sweat pouring down his face.
“I...” Daiga desperately opened his immobile mouth to signal something was wrong.
But above his head, the lights began flickering on and off.
“Huh? That's weird.” Sykes frantically pounded the buttons on the control console.
Simultaneously, the scanner room lights began to flicker, and even the console lamp started to fade.
“Is it a power shortage, Doctor?”
“That can't be. This is the latest fusion-powered ship. There's no way the breaker would trip.” Dr. Grant also issued a brainwave command, but the flashing showed no sign of stopping. Inside the scanner room, Lorraine also looked uneasy.
“Um, is it malfunctioning?”
“Looks like it. We'll fix it right away, so stay where you are.”
Reiko said, then suddenly turned her gaze to Daiga.
In that instant, she noticed him staring intently at the tattoo on the screen.
“Hey, Daiga, you...!”
“...I'm not dumb enough to believe it's a malfunction.”
He finally squeezed out the words, wiping away cold sweat.
Forcibly shaking off the tattoo's gaze, Daiga scanned the surrounding atmosphere.
“The inspection is canceled. I'm going to Lorraine's room.”
At Daiga's words, the group froze. Beyond the glass, Lorraine also sensed something and stood up.
Major Hadley slipped his hand into his breast pocket, gripping his pistol. “Then go to that door.” Hadley pointed toward the corner of the room for Daiga.
“It's the door to the scanner room. It's unlocked.”
At that instant, something crossed Daiga's field of vision.
Beyond the glass wall, a shadow darted through the scanner room.
But even when he stared intently to confirm, the flickering lights made it impossible to see clearly.
“What was that just now...” Something was definitely there. Yet all he could see in the scanner room were Lorraine and the inspection equipment.
Then the flickering lights suddenly accelerated.
As if to heighten his terror, faster and faster and faster...
Unable to bear it, Daiga lunged for the door.
“Lorraine, over here...!” But Daiga's cry was cut off by utter shock.
The door, which should have been open, didn't budge an inch.

【Chapter 2】

Daiga's hand was definitely gripping the doorknob.
But it was being turned back with tremendous force, not budging even a millimeter.
The door... shouldn't be locked... Just as he thought that, the door began to transform.
"This is...!" The center of the door darkened, rapidly spreading and taking shape.
Then its core swelled, bulging out from the door.
Gradually solidifying, the head of something.
Like a fetus emerging from its mother, it let out a cry, wailing.
"G-g-g-g-g..."
What emerged from the door was a pitch-black upper body - its hairy head bore long, pointed ears. Its mouth, split wide to the ears, held two rows of sharp fangs.
Muscular arms ended in fingers that were far too long, topped with twisted claws, and beneath its armpits lay the greatest clue to its true nature.
The glossy black wings could only belong to a bat.
"A, a monster...!" Sykes tumbled from his chair at the sight of the monstrous form appearing before him.
The bat let out a strange cry and burst through the door.
Two meters tall. Sharp claws even on its toes. A long tail whipped like a lash.
Its bloodshot eyes locked onto Daiga as it leapt at him from point-blank range.
But Hadley's arms shot out, drawing twin automatic pistols.
"Daiga, get down!"
The Belgian-made FN 57 unleashed a relentless barrage of freeze rounds.
The bullets possessed just enough power to incapacitate the undead minions of the demonic horde. Hadley's precise shot pierced the head of the monstrous creature, which could only be described as a human bat. But the color of the splattered bodily fluid was a murky gray.
"It's not a demon!" Daiga realized instantly. If it were a demon, the bodily fluid should have been iridescent. Probably a clone or a minion. The demon horde controlling this thing is somewhere nearby.
But even if it wasn't a demon, the monstrosity didn't flinch from the freezing bullets.
It raised both arms, lunging at Daiga with claws on its left and right.
"Run! I'll handle this...!" Daiga grabbed the bat's wrist, stopping it just before its claws could slash him. But from that position, the aberration swiftly thrust both legs forward. It used its long tail like a third leg, supporting its entire body.
Then, with a swift kick from both feet, it sent Daiga's body flying.
The sound of ribs shattering. Daiga slammed into the wall from behind.
An unexpected concussion. The momentum carried him through the wall panel, hurling him into the corridor.
"Dai-chan!" The scene was visible in the scanner room.
When screams came from the speakers, Hadley yelled.
"The demons are attacking! Secure the First Lady!"
Reiko also raised her beloved Beretta M92 and shielded Dr. Grant with her back.
Captain Ramsey also rushed out of the studio and shouted sharply.

“Demons aboard ship! Marine guards, report here!”
But the commotion had already reached outside Studio 1.
Team Ascalon, who had been on standby, rushed into the scanner room where Lorraine was. Lorraine also started running toward them, but another shadow leaped down from above her head.
“Aaaah!” Three new stains spread across the scanner room ceiling.
They dripped down as black shadows, materializing into a bat baring its fangs.
Under the flickering lights, sharp claws scattered the Ascalon team members.
Fresh blood spattered. Lorraine stiffened and backed toward the wall.
“There's one over there too!” Reiko shouted, gripping her Beretta in both hands.
But even if she tried to help, bats blocked the door to the scanner room.
The monstrosity that had kicked away the large fang slowly turned its face toward Reiko.
It bared its double rows of fangs, extending its hairy arms forward.
Just as Reiko's arms involuntarily stiffened, a voice screamed in her ear.
“Get the Doctor and run!” Hadley, stepping forward, fired a freeze-bullet into the hideous mouth. Upon impact, white smoke resembling dry ice spewed from the bat's mouth - but the monster let out a single howl, swiftly whipping its long tail to sweep Hadley's legs out from under him.
“Gah...!” Hadley's tall frame spun once in the air, tossed about.
He slammed into the control console, shattering the metal panel.
Enveloped in a shower of sparks, Hadley tumbled to the floor.
“Richard!” As she called his name, Reiko also fired her Beretta in rapid succession, aiming for the eyes. Continuing to fire, Reiko shouted over her shoulder.
“Go, Doctor! We'll take care of this place...!”
“Don't be ridiculous!” Pulling the plug from his neck, the Doctor leapt from the control pod.
“This is my first chance to observe the demon horde up close! I won't let this opportunity slip away!” But Dr. Grant clung to Reiko, his teeth chattering.
“Besides, you're the only one left now! I can't leave you behind!”
But Reiko dropped the empty magazine on the floor and said,
“Daiga'll be up soon!” Then she loaded a new magazine into the Beretta. “Lorraine won't talk to him if he dies like this!” Before Reiko's eyes, the bat, shrouded in white smoke, drooled. Even after taking that many bullets, it showed no sign of falling.
But it didn't approach Reiko; the monstrosity turned its head behind it.
It sensed the murderous intent rising like a hot wind from the wreckage.
“You got cocky...” Daiga unleashed a torrent of curses upon the bat's back.
It was a tirade directed at himself for falling victim to the ambush.
Rage surged through his body, unleashing the power bestowed upon his clan.
Power surged through his broken ribs, producing a satisfying crackling sound.
In an instant, bone tissue regenerated, pain and heat vanishing.
The name of that power: Blood Soul.
The physical healing technique utilizing Blood Soul was called Kappo.
But Kappo was merely one facet of the Hououji-style Martial Arts.
A technique to cut away demons, the counterpart to Kappo, also existed.

“Wait for me, Lorraine!” A crimson flash erupted from Daiga’s hand as he stepped forward. In an instant, it became a blade, transforming into the Suzaku Blade.
The killing technique of the Phoenix-style martial arts struck at the monstrous bat.
But the bat, too, aimed for Daiga's head with its left arm and swept at his feet with its right. Attacked simultaneously along diagonal lines of his body, few could respond to both threats. Yet the blade traced a trajectory surpassing all expectations.
As Daiga spun the Suzaku blade once, it extended to more than double its length – it spun like a windmill, wrapping around the monstrosity's arms and slicing them off.
Reiko, watching, instinctively flinched. “It's faster than before...!”
But the bat, having lost both arms, rose again on its tail.
Using its legs instead of arms, it roared, attempting to knock Daiga away.
Yet Daiga planted his feet firmly, countering the movement.
“I've read you now.” The bat's kick swung wildly, missing Daiga by inches.
By the slimmest margin—just one centimeter short.
Upon closer inspection, Daiga was retreating while maintaining the same stance.
He calculated the bat's attack range and retreated to the very edge of the safety zone.
“How can he move like that?!” Dr. Grant exclaimed in astonishment from behind Reiko.
Once an attack is received, it is imprinted on the body, and it will never be received again. Putting the teachings of his old man into practice, Daiga swung down the Phoenix Blade.
The bat, split in two from the top of its head, turned to black charcoal on the spot.
Stepping over the pile of corpses, Daiga turned his gaze to the scanner room. “Lorraine!”
Their eyes met through the glass.
She was not safe. The Ascalon members were lying on the ground.
The bats had already surrounded the girl.
Daiga charged toward the door leading to the scanner room.
“Don't touch her!” Hearing his shout, one of the bats turned around.
It flew into the door, trying to pierce the thick metal.
But the Crimson Blade slashed horizontally and vertically at the monstrosity that had become one with the door. Neither Reiko nor Grant could see the movement of Daiga's arm.
“Dai-chan!” Only a crimson flash—a cross-shaped flash—coalesced.
But immediately after, the bats were sliced clean through, along with the thick door, into four pieces. Kicking aside collapsing debris, Daiga finally burst into the scanner room.
Lorraine's voice finally reached him. But she was already captured by the bats.
Those two bats let out ugly, smirking grins.
Then, suddenly, the bats' gaze dropped down to Daiga's feet.
Had their bodies shrunk? No, that wasn't it.
The lower halves of the bats turned into black stains again, beginning to melt into the floor.
And Lorraine was being swallowed up by that black stain too.
“Kya...!” The scream cut off as her swaying blonde hair was sucked into the darkness.
Reiko's sharp voice rang out to the stunned Daiga.

“Lorraine's on the third deck directly below us! We're tracking her!”
Reiko pointed at her wristwatch and shouted.
Instantly, Daiga glared at his own watch. A red light flashed on the dial. The location-tracking ink injected into Lorraine's body was reacting.
Roaring, Daiga swung the Phoenix Blade.
“Sorry, but I'm going through here!” A crimson flash sliced through the scanner room floor. A thunderous crash. The single blow had cleaved the floor's supporting steel beams in two.
Daiga plunged downward with the severed section of floor, momentum carrying him - and the pursuit began.
One bat carried Lorraine, passing through door after door.
Another bat leading the way flung crew members aside with its long arms.
Daiga shouted sharply at the Marines rushing into the corridor.
“Don't shoot! You'll hit Lorraine!”
Then he himself continued the pursuit at an extraordinary speed.
Soon, the monstrosity fled to the lower decks, slipping through a thick door.
Daiga couldn't wait to open it; he rammed through. “This is...”
Daiga arrived at a desolate section.
Darkness reminiscent of an underground parking garage. Probably a vehicle storage bay.
Neither the bat's form nor Lorraine's breathing could be heard.
But the light point indicating the girl's position was definitely flashing on the wristwatch.
“...An ambush?” The moment the thought crossed his mind, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He dodged. But an impact and searing pain struck the back of his head. Daiga cut through the air, taking a wide step back.
Blood flowed from the back of his neck. Unnoticed, a bat had closed in behind him.
“Gii... gii... giiiii...” One monstrous form stretched its arms wide, poised to strike.
But in the next instant, another appeared overhead.
He barely leapt right, evading the sharp claws.
The missed bat strike shattered the floor into dust.
Its speed and power were incomparable to the first.
“I see... So the dark is your home turf. Fitting, really.”
Facing the clearly strengthened enemy, Daiga bit his lip.
Then, he channeled his Blood Soul into the Suzaku Blade he gripped once more.
“But you know what? I prefer light.”
The Crimson Blade glowed brighter, illuminating the hangar.
As the bat bared its fangs at the light, a voice called from above.
“Dai-chan, over here!”
Lorraine's voice. For a moment, he looked up.
To his surprise, the girl was near the hangar ceiling.
Her body was bound to a metal support pillar.
Wrapped around her were the wires used to secure vehicles.
“What the hell are you doing?!” When Daiga slashed straight ahead, the enemy sneered and leapt back swiftly from the blade's tip. In response, another bat charged from the side.

But the Suzaku Blade spun back at lightning speed. Even if Lorraine was taken, Daiga remained calm.
The enemy lurked in the darkness. Luring them out was quicker than searching blindly.
That strike sliced through the monstrous arm, drawing a sharp scream.
“Dai-chan, behind you!” Once more, a bat's powerful arm attacked from behind.
Daiga parried the assault with his blade and stepped back.
Then the bat attacked again. Parry. Attack. Parry. Attack.
The crimson blade and claws collided, scattering pale blue sparks.
In that opening, another creature flapped its wings wide and flew behind Daiga.
His retreat was blocked. Realizing this, Daiga released his Blood Soul from his body.
“Let's fly then, together.” A blue flash. From Daiga's body, the wings of the Seiryu shimmered as light. Daiga leapt over the relentless bats' heads, taking them from behind.
The monstrosity turned. But it was too late. The crimson blade sliced diagonally across its chest.
The phoenix blade, its power amplified, crushed bone and flesh in an instant. But...
“What the hell?!” Daiga dodged the sudden deafening roar.
A massive sound pressure wave, making his eardrums vibrate violently, slammed into him. Simultaneously, countless things slammed into his entire body.
They grazed Daiga's skin, tore at his flesh, and ran mad with spurting blood.
“Clones...!”
Yes, what attacked Daiga were the very flesh fragments he thought he'd cut down.
But now, each one had transformed into a tiny bat.
Their number—hundreds, thousands... How many of these writhing masses lurked in the darkness? A swarm of bats surrounded Daiga with the sound of flapping wings.
“Get out of the way, you—!” A bat clung to his mouth as he shouted.
Another bat followed instantly, and in an instant, his vision was blocked.
Daiga frantically tore the bats off, but the assault didn't stop.
Covered in clinging bats, Daiga instinctively dropped to his knees.
“Dai-chan, hold on!” Lorraine shouted, her voice catching in her throat.
Another bat-man had risen into the space before them.
Drool dripping from its fangs, the monstrosity reached out toward Lorraine.
“...!” Lorraine's terror barely reached Daiga.
He slammed the bat clinging to his face onto the floor and looked up at the girl.
“I told you not to touch her!” Daiga tried once more to grasp the Suzaku Blade.
But when he looked, the Crimson Blade had vanished from his hand.
Far from it, even the pulse of his Blood Soul was weakening.
daiga still hadn't realized what had happened to him.
Above him, Lorraine's surgical gown was being torn apart.
“No, Daiga!” Floating in the darkness was the girl's pale skin. And the writhing tattoo. That tattoo laughed silently on Lorraine's skin.
"Gh... ha..." The bat facing the tattoo also let out a cry of delight.
It flapped its wings, writhing in the air as if craving something.
The tattoo smiled at this sight, its limbs writhing lasciviously.

The bizarre scene sent a chill down Daiga's spine.
“They're calling to each other...” And then Daiga finally realized.
Looking down, he saw countless bats clinging to his body.
Every single one was gulping down his blood.
The blood of the Hououji clan, meant to destroy demon hordes, was being stolen from Daiga's body! It was a tactic devised precisely after discerning Daiga's power.
“How dare you suck human blood without permission...” Daiga groaned lowly within his fading consciousness. “This blood isn't yours... This blood belongs to...!”
Lorraine's. That's what Daiga believed. The blood of the Hōōji clan was the only way to slay the demon horde and save Lorraine. But if that blood was taken, Daiga would lose his reason for living, and he would lose Lorraine too.
He wouldn't let it be taken. The thought made the blood remaining in his body surge violently. And just as Daiga prepared to unleash his power once more...
“I see. So this is how you fight, Daiga Hououji.”
At the young man's voice, Daiga spun around.
A tall figure had entered the warehouse unnoticed.
His face was indistinct. All visible was the glint of round sunglasses.
And the tiny ember of a cigarette held at an angle between his teeth.
“If that's the case, I'm disappointed in your utter powerlessness.”
A demon. Daiga was certain of it.
A sneer played upon his lips. A truly devilish smile, devoid of even a shred of pity.
This man must be the one controlling the bats.
The man laughed behind his back.
“If I look like a demon horde to you, then your judgment is worse than a bat's.”
Still facing away, he flung his sunglasses aside.
“A man of your caliber would only disappoint that girl.”
The unseen man released a killing intent from his entire body.
This guy... Who the hell is he!?
But before he could ponder further, daiga noticed something amiss with the bat.
The monstrosity screamed and froze in place.
But it wasn't from mental terror.
Literally, the bat's flesh was beginning to harden like stone.
"Gii…!!” With a series of cracking sounds, the bat was transforming into a stone statue.
And yet, that man hadn't moved a muscle.
He simply stood before the bat, staring at the monstrosity.
“Who the hell are you…”
As Daiga muttered, the man flung something from each hip.
It traced an arc through the air and was sucked into the stone statue-turned-bat.
Sparks flew as the bat's body was effortlessly cleaved apart.
The moment it returned to the man's fingertips, it began spinning round and round.

“A chakram!” Daiga knew the name of that weapon.
A throwing weapon passed down since ancient times in India and Central Africa - it looked like a flat metal ring, but its outer edge was a razor-sharp blade.
He'd heard they were used for hunting. But to think it possessed the power to cleave a stone statue in two! Yet before the stunned Daiga, the man hurled the spinning cutting ring once more - it flew nearly to the ceiling, severing Lorraine's bonds.
“Kyaah!” Lorraine, freed from her restraints, her golden hair swaying softly.
But her slender body began falling toward the cold floor. “Lorraine!”
Daiga lunged to catch her. But once again, the man moved first.
Recovering the spinning cutting ring, he gracefully positioned himself at her point of impact.
He caught her body, cradling it gently as if embracing her.
“Forgive my roughness, young lady.”
His voice suddenly shifted to a sweetly melodic French accent.
“But your beauty did not disappoint me. That alone made coming to Japan worthwhile.”

The man gazed at the half-naked Lorraine as if she were a noble painting.
Lorraine, caught in his embrace, stared back at him in wonder.
“Who exactly are you?”
“Zet Hannibal.”
The man stated his name for the first time. “To protect you. That is my mission.”
Then the man turned his gaze toward Daiga.
Daiga involuntarily gasped in astonishment. The man's eyes were not human.

“I never expected you to be here too.” Major Hadley said this while receiving treatment.
“The Colonel's become quite the villain. If he was sending reinforcements, he could have at least told us.”
“I agree on that point.” Zett Hannibal replied from the sofa. "Occasionally, he does terribly childish things. Sending me off to Japan without a word to you lot, for example. Right now, he’s probably imagining your astonished faces, he's grinning like the Cheshire Cat." Saying this, he tilted his wine glass.
"But in Wonderland, the Cheshire Cat's words are the most sensible. Surely this prank, too, stems from some deeper thought."
The hour had already reached sunset.
From the grand hall of the research vessel Critias, the night view of Yokohama stretched out before them.
Illuminations, unaware of the day's battle, dazzlingly colored the harbor.
And the man sunk into the sofa was dressed just as flashily as the nightscape. Zet Hannibal stood about two centimeters taller than Daiga - his slender physique was covered by a sleeveless T-shirt and leather pants.
Accessories jangled and dangled from every part of his body.
Piercings adorned his ears, a necklace hung around his neck, and multiple bracelets encircled his arms. His long white hair was meticulously waved, falling to his shoulders. The man, his eyes hidden behind pale-tinted sunglasses, looked nothing like someone from the Ziegen Agency – and yet, Daiga had already witnessed his extraordinary combat abilities firsthand.
“Let me reintroduce you, Daiga.” Reiko wrapped a bandage around Hadley's arm as she spoke.
“His name is Zett Hannibal. He's seventeen, just like you. He's a special combatant from the Ziegen Agency's Team Balmung. He came aboard this ship as Dr. Grant's escort.”
“I heard that already,” Daiga groaned irritably.
“He's a replacement for Team Ascalon. They sent him because Hadley's team is understaffed.”
“That's right. By order of Colonel Walter von Dietrich.” Zett raised his glass to Daiga.
“He was worried about your abilities as his son. Guess colonel's premonition was right.”
“He...” Daiga tried to say something, but grimaced as unexpected dizziness struck him.
It seemed those bats had drained him of quite a bit of blood.
Noticing his unsteady body, Zett shrugged his shoulders.

“Looks like you're low on blood rushing to your head right now. Well, relax. I alone am more than enough to guard Miss Lorraine. Even if you meet an untimely end, I'll protect her with honor.” Daiga sank silently into his chair.

Zett watched him with a smirk.

“Let me guess, Daiga – you’re thinking that could have saved Lorraine without my help right now. True, in that fight just now, I had three seconds more breathing room than you. That might be all it was. But in a fight against a Demon, not even three seconds can be wasted.” Zett sipped his wine quietly.

“You should understand that. After all, you are one of the three people in the world who can defeat the demon horde.”

“Who are the other two?”

“I'm surprised you asked. Your grandfather and myself.”

Daiga stared at Zett's sunglasses.

His eyes were burned into his mind. Surely he... Just as he thought that, the door opened.

“No good, Major Hadley. Absolutely no good.” Scratching his head, Dr. Grant entered the room.

“Repairing the equipment in Studio One is going to take longer than expected. Even installing the backup unit will take until morning. Please postpone Miss Lorraine's examination until tomorrow.”

“I suppose we have no choice.” Hadley grimaced at his bandaged arm.

“Until the inspection is complete, we'll be staying aboard as well. Now that we know the demon horde is targeting Lorraine again, we need to investigate sooner rather than later.”

“Understood. By the way, is there a chance I might observe a demon again?”

“Probably plenty. More than you'd care to handle, if you wish.”

“Give me a break,” the doctor waved his hand dismissively.

"Those things really aren't subjects for direct observation. Even with a reliable escort, I'd rather not. But hats off to you, Zett. I hear you did a splendid job repelling the enemy, eh?"

At that, Zett smiled with satisfaction. “I accomplished my mission. Unlike that man over there.”

“You...!” Just as Daiga was about to storm out, Lorraine appeared from behind the Doctor.

Changed back into civilian clothes, she seemed to be looking down.

“Hey, Lorraine, you...”

“Um, Zett-san...” Ignoring Daiga, the girl stepped forward in front of the sofa.

Then, with a slight bow, she lowered her small head.

“Thank you... for saving Dai-chan...”

Her voice was slightly tearful. Her shoulders were trembling too.

Daiga once again savored the taste of his defeat.

Watching him out of the corner of his eye, Zett stood up.

“It wasn't Daiga I saved, it was you. But well, we can let it slide today. Being thanked by someone as beautiful as you doesn't leave me feeling bad.”

Then, lifting Lorraine's right hand, he kissed it softly.

To the startled girl, Zett winked through his sunglasses.
“Your eyes remind me of my homeland, the Mediterranean.”
“Eh... um, does that mean...”
“I was born in Tunisia to French immigrants. Though personally, I'd rather claim to be born in Carthage. Do you know the name Hannibal?”
Lorraine regained a slight smile. “Um, I studied him in world history. He was the general who fought Rome, right...?”
“That's more than most know. Two thousand two hundred years ago, he employed the brilliant strategy of crossing the Alps, nearly destroying the Roman Republic. My surname originates from that legendary hero.” Zed then bowed respectfully.
“I have been appointed your escort. I swear here that I will fight like Hannibal.”
Lorraine's eyes widened at the grand gesture.
Reiko sighed and nudged Daiga's shoulder.
“You should learn a thing or two from him. Even if he's annoyingly pretentious, at least he managed to stop Lorraine's tears.”
“...I know.” That answer seemed unexpected to both Reiko and Zett.
The man born in Carthage flicked his eyebrow up.
“So you finally acknowledge me. And you've realized your own capabilities too.”
Pushing the girl aside, Zett turned back to Daiga.
“Just because you defeated the demon horde once doesn't mean you can do it again. Nothing's more foolish than getting cocky after a fluke victory.”
Reiko showed disgust at the blatant provocation.
“Enough, Zett. He may have messed up earlier, but Daiga is a capable warrior.”
“A truly capable warrior is one who never fails.” Zett retorted sharply.
"Miss Sakimizu, the Ziegen Agency shouldn't rely on a man like this. He nearly lost Miss Lorraine. And not just once. Many times. Countless times."
His voice grew increasingly heated. “The colonel's wife risked her life to protect this man. Yet you haven't lived up to her expectations. You haven't grown stronger. If that's the case, she must surely be filled with regret in death.”
“Zett, you're going too far.” As Reiko spoke, a white flash streaked through the air.
Daiga's fist closed in on Zett's face. The light of Byakko coiled around his clenched hand.
There was no swing motion whatsoever. The ultimate short hook.
But Zett, too, had caught Daiga's arm at the last instant.
“Daiga, you...!” Zett's body trembled at Daiga's sheer strength.
Daiga squeezed out a voice to Zett, who had stopped his fist.
"I don't care how much you say it. I screwed up, that's a fact." Face to face, Daiga said.
“I'm grateful, too. You saved Lorraine. That's why I can't take my anger out on you.”
But, Daiga continued. “Don't talk about my mom. I don't remember her either. There's no way you could know. Talking about how my dead mom felt? You couldn't possibly do that.” Days of nightmarish fear flashed through Daiga's mind.
He had taken his mother's devotion far too much to heart.
Her act of self-sacrifice weighed heavily on him.
Sure, his mother might be disappointed too, but he couldn't stand Zett speaking for her.
“Dai-chan, stop. Please...”

Lorraine's worried voice snapped Daiga back to reality.
“This is between us, mother and son.” He glared at Zett.
“You have no right to meddle in our business.”
But Zett, too, radiated a blood-curdling killing intent. With his free hand, he calmly removed his sunglasses.
“Daiga, you were loved by your mother. That is a fact.” Then, his eyes flashed.
“I don't envy you, but because of these eyes... my mother despised me.”
Daiga found himself face-to-face with Zett's eyes.
Then, in an instant, Zett's pupils changed to vertical slits.
There was no mistaking it. They were the eyes of a cold-blooded venomous snake.
From those eyes, a gaze that had defeated the minions of the demon horde was unleashed.
In an instant, Daiga’s hand, which was grabbing Zett, visibly began to turn to stone.
“Your eyes...”
“They're natural serpent eyes. They can petrify any living creature. It's because of this ability that I was taken in by the Ziegen Agency and trained by Colonel Dietrich.”
Zett declared to Daiga, his eyes still those of a venomous serpent.
“If you don't want to hear my scorn, become stronger. Stronger than you are now. Otherwise, you have no right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me in battle. Even if you possess the blood of the Hououji clan.”
Even as the petrification advanced to his elbow, Daiga continued to face Zett.
Zett, too, radiated an indescribable emotion.
Moreover, it was a bottomless, complex feeling directed at Daiga personally.
It wasn't simple hatred or disappointment. It was a far more intense obsession.
“What the hell are you...” Just as he started to speak, Lorraine interrupted.
“Please, Zett-san! Heal Dai-chan's hand!”
She threw herself at Zett, clinging desperately and kicking her legs.
“Like this, Dai-chan will turn completely to stone! Please, he's important to me! Please!”
In that instant, Zett's eyes changed again - not the eyes of a venomous snake, but now compound eyes. With eyes reminiscent of an insect, Zett looked Daiga’s stone arm.
“Insect charm. It relaxes a living creature's body and even breaks petrification.”
With his eyes, the Great Fang's arm regained its vitality.
Zett released the arm and put his sunglasses back over both eyes.
“When begged with such a lovely voice, even I must comply. For today, I'll spare you for Miss Lorraine's sake. But there won't be a second time.” Zett declared this firmly.
“If you make a blunder like today's... Daiga, consider yourself relieved of Miss Lorraine's protection. You're no longer the only man who can defeat the demon horde, now that I've come to Japan.”
“...Understood. I'll remember.” Daiga rubbed his arm, now restored to normal.
Zett smiled with ample confidence and started to leave the room.
Then, Lorraine approached his back once more.
“Um, Zett-san... Thank you so much. For saving Dai-chan.”
The girl clasped her hands tightly together as she spoke.
“Well... I look forward to working with you from now on.”

“Likewise, Mademoiselle Lorraine. But your speech is rather stiff.” Zett opened the door and smiled. “Personally, I'd expect a more intimate form of address than ‘Daiga’. Good night.” The door closed, and Zett's footsteps faded.
As if releasing the tension in the room, Reiko exhaled.
“Zett was definitely rude... but Daiga, that hook just now was overkill.”
“Using Byakko’s Fist, huh?”
Daiga shook his head and laughed. “That wasn't overkill. I figured he could dodge it. Besides, Zett actually stopped my fist, didn't he?”
“So you saw through his power?” To Reiko's question, Daiga reluctantly nodded.
“His ability is petrifying snake eyes. But he didn't fight the bat relying solely on that talent. Just watching his movements in battle, I knew he was a capable guy.”
Daiga noticed his own cheeks relaxing.
It was a habit of his—he got excited when he encountered a strong opponent.
“Zett said it himself, didn't he? That he was trained. And by my old man, no less.”
“Daiga...”
“My dad raised Zett. That alone makes him an interesting guy, I think.”
Complex emotions welled up inside Daiga too. But he couldn't explain them now. Only this much Daiga understood: Zett felt the same way.

Zett reached his cabin inside the ship - but the instant his hand touched the doorknob, he turned back into the darkness behind him.
Emerging from the shadows of the corridor was Major Hadley.
“I kept you waiting. I wanted to have a word.”
“Of course you did. I'm joining your team starting today.”
Zett slipped his hands into his pockets and leaned against the wall.
“So straight to the lecture, huh? I know what you’re gonna say – get along better with Daiga...”
“No need for that.” Hadley flashed a smile even more cunning than Zett's.
“We're soldiers. We don't need to hold hands and be all friendly. As long as the mission gets done, that's all that matters. In fact, it's better if you and Daiga compete and push each other to improve.” Zett scowled and put a cigarette in his mouth.
“So, what is it?”
“It's about your mission.” Hadley snatched the cigarette from Zett's mouth.
He crushed it underfoot where it lay discarded on the floor, then the British Army Major turned his gaze back to Zett. “Answer me. What orders did Colonel Dietrich give you?”
“Naturally, reinforcements for Team Ascalon. And the protection of Miss Lorraine.”
“You think that answer will satisfy me?”
“I don't expect it to. But for now, you'll have to be satisfied.” Zett scratched the back of his neck.
“Major Hadley... you should understand by now. The Colonel's will.”
“To a certain extent. But not as well as you. After all, you're the Colonel's favorite pupil. You've grown more like him again since we last met.”
“I'm more cherished by the Colonel than his own son. That much I won't concede.”

Their gazes locked in the dark passageway.
“Let me make this clear, Zett. Daiga doesn't move on Ziegen Agency orders. He fights for Lorraine as he sees fit. If that's the case, Daiga will become your enemy.”
“I'm afraid I don't quite grasp the meaning of your warning.” Zett laughed, then immediately twisted his mouth. "Daiga Hououji... he's a terrible man. Even if only for a moment, he brought up my past just now. My mother's and such... I wanted to reveal my genuine hatred for him much later."
“Seems your training still falls short.” Hadley cleared his throat and fixed his gaze on his new subordinate. “But what I want to know is your true feelings and your real mission. Be careful about the timing you choose to carry it out. Fail, and it's all over."
“So, when is the best timing?”
“The final moment. When everyone has given up everything.”
Hadley said this and turned away.
“But you know, only Daiga won't give up until the very end. I'll guarantee you that much.”
Zett saw his superior off in silence.
The only words Hadley left behind were a faint smile.

The cabin they were given was a comfortable twin room.
The night view of Yokohama Harbor stretched out beyond the window, and the two beds lined up side by side were wide and soft. In that room, as luxurious as a cruise ship cabin...
“Hey, Daichan, what have you been doing all this time?”Lorraine said, sitting on the bed.
“Can I take a bath now? I'm really tired today.”
“Bath? No way! Don't take your clothes off yet!”
Since a moment ago, Daiga had been crawling on the cabin floor.
A trash can tucked under his arm, he frantically scanned the room with his eyes.
His sharp gaze locked onto another target. “Found another one here... Dammit! That bitch Reiko, what a pain.” What he pried from behind a potted plant was a pea-sized, ultra-miniature surveillance camera.
Countless such cameras had been planted throughout Daiga and Lorraine's cabin - but Daiga was tossing them all into the trash can. “I can't let them film any more embarrassing videos of you I've got to destroy that master tape myself too...”
“Hey, Daiga. Is it okay to take that off?” Lorraine peered into the trash can, puzzled.
“Reiko-san had it installed because she's monitoring from the ship's security room.”
“It's fine. We don't need this thing. Besides, I'm here, aren't I?”
Wiping sweat from his brow, Daiga sat down on his own bed. “As long as you're within my sight, Lorraine, you're safe. And Reiko's fine, but... someone else might be watching you.”
“Someone else? Like who?”
“That assistant, Sykes, was all over you. And Zett? You can't trust him either. Anyway, I just hate the idea of you being watched by other men.”
Lorraine giggled softly. “Zett-san is fine. He's on our side, right?”

“No, in this matter, there are no friends or enemies! Besides, I hate men like him. All talk, changing their attitude around women.”
“But Zett-san isn't just talk. He's incredibly strong.” Lorraine suddenly closed her eyes, lost in a dreamy recollection. “Besides, Zett-san is kinda cool. When he caught me, my heart skipped a beat.”
“Cool? That flashy jerk?” Daiga crushed one of the surveillance cameras in his fist.
“He spits venom worse than his cheesy lines. That guy's got a twisted personality.”
“He might have a sharp tongue... but deep down, he's a good person, I'm sure.”
“You're defending him a lot... Do you like a guy like that?”
“What are you talking about, Dai-chan?” Lorraine said, looking puzzled.
“You're my favorite. You're the coolest. Hey, why are you asking such an obvious question?”
“Ah, uh...” Daiga snapped back to reality and scratched his head.
He avoided Lorraine's direct gaze. “...W-well, if that's how it is, then fine.”
“You're acting weird, Daiga. Are you still holding a grudge about fighting Zett-san earlier?”
Daiga said that wasn't the case. “I just lost my temper. He won't bring up my mom again, will he?”
Daiga murmured, and the girl sat down on the bed beside him.
“Hey, Dai-chan. Do you still have those nightmares?...”
“Ah, I don't have them anymore.” Daiga gave a faint smile.
“It's strange, isn't it? After suffering for so long... Ever since the battle with Gentsu, I haven't seen them once.”
The memory of his mother being killed by the demon right before his eyes. The helplessness of being unable to do anything. That was the nightmare that had haunted Daiga. Moreover, the Heavenly Demon, Gentsu, had exploited that terror, materializing the nightmare and thrusting it upon Daiga.
But that too was now in the past. Daiga understood his dead mother's feelings.
She held no grudge. She had died protecting her beloved child.
“It's thanks to you.” Daiga stared at Lorraine.
“You saved me. You erased the nightmare.”
“...Dai-chan.”
“So now it's my turn. I'll erase your tattoo. Completely.”
Daiga took hold of the girl's slender arm. The tattooed woman curled up in a ball upon that skin. I'll drive her out for sure. That's what Daiga thought.
“Dai-chan...!” Lorraine clung to Daiga.
At the point of her gaze, the tattooed woman slowly stretched her limbs.
She wrapped her long hair around both arms, flaunting her ample breasts at Daiga.
Her narrow waist undulated dramatically, supple legs writhing seductively.
Flawless, ultimate beauty. Yet what the woman emitted was, once again, a raucous laugh.
“This bitch...” Daiga felt his insides clench at that voice once more.
And then, an anomaly struck the port town.

The time display lit up on the Ferris wheel at Yokohama Cosmo World.
Exactly eight o'clock. A Saturday night during summer vacation.
Closing time was near, yet crowds still bustled about.
Couples emerging from the amusement park. Families finishing their meals.
Centered around the Minato Mirai district, Yokohama was enveloped in tranquility.
In the midst of that bustle...
“Hello? Hello, A-kun?”
“What's up?”
“Something's weird. My phone's dead.”
“Maybe it's just bad reception. Wait, mine's...?” In the gridlocked line of cars...
“What's up with that intersection? The lights are out.”
“Must be broken. That's dangerous.”
“Nah, it's not. The next intersection too...”

Amidst the bustle of Chinatown...
“Ma-chan, are you full already?” The intersection ahead too...
“Yeah, Mom. But I want to buy souvenirs too.”
“Then pick quickly. We don't want to be late.”
“I know. ...Oh, Mom.”
“What is it, Maa-chan?”
“Look... The stars... They disappeared.” In an instant, a violent wind swept through.
A terrifying gale swept inland from Yokohama Harbor.
Its fury blew away the bustling crowds, slamming people against the city.
Cars overturned, collided violently, and burst into flames.
Felled street trees blocked roads, crushing people fleeing in panic.
At JR Yokohama Station, an arriving train plowed into the platform.
Screams filled the air. Just how many people were swallowed up in that instant?
And this storm was no ordinary tempest.

The research vessel Critias was also caught in the storm at the International Pier.
Each time a gust shook the hull, the mooring wires screeched in protest.
Worse still, the ship had already slammed into the pier multiple times.
“Report the situation!” Reiko fought the rolling motion to reach the bridge.
Captain Ramsey was already at her station.
No, perhaps “merged” was more accurate. Connected to the hemispherical control shell, the captain processed a torrent of information and displayed instructions on the surrounding monitors. She was the very brain of this cyborg ship.
The hull was her body, and the communication system was her nerves.
“It's like a miniature typhoon appeared. The storm's radius is about three kilometers centered on JR Kannai Station. Yokohama Station and the Bay Bridge entrance have suffered significant damage.”
“We need precise information.”
“It's impossible to get that now.” Captain Ramsey enlarged the 3D display showing the storm's radius.

“High-density radio jamming, partial power outages severing the wired communication network, and fires have also severed the underground cable network. Communication capacity has dropped below 20%.”

“So it’s a demon’s Suppressed Domain?”

“Even a child could tell by looking outside.” Reiko also looked out the bridge window.

The Yokohama illuminations that had colored the nightscape moments ago were nowhere to be seen - this was partly due to the power outages and fires that had destroyed them, but the greater reason was something else: something was swarming through the air, obscuring the night view.

Reiko approached the window and stared at the fine particles striking the reinforced glass. “...A sandstorm.” It was indeed yellow grains of sand dancing in the night.

A sudden yellow storm had engulfed Yokohama Harbor.

“We should assume the sandstorm is targeting this ship.”

Captain Ramsey turned her face while still connected to the control shell.

“If that's the case, Miss Sakomizu, what do you intend to do?”

“Can we sail? Escape the storm's reach with the ship intact?”

“If you tell me to. But sand is already accumulating on deck.”

The captain displayed a cross-section of the seabed within Yokohama Harbor.

“Removing the sand will take time. And as time passes, the shoals shift position. They might be narrowing the navigable channel to trap us.”

“As captain, you can't guarantee safety?”

“Yes. And the bigger problem is the hull damage. Since earlier, the pier has been...”

Then, another violent sway hit the ship. The impact of slamming into the pier. Reiko instinctively clung to the control console.

Captain Ramsey, clearly accustomed to rough seas, continued undeterred.

“We're still inspecting it... but if we get attacked out at sea, it could be disastrous.”

“Understood. I'll have the protected individuals disembark.”

Reiko straightened her posture and stated. “Besides, if we come under attack by the demon horde, both Daiga and Zett will be able to fight more effectively with their feet firmly planted on land.”

“A wise decision. You've clearly learned from fighting Demons once before.”

Hearing this, Reiko clutched her chest painfully. “Being able to make wise decisions is just a matter of time. Frankly, I feel like I'm going to vomit.”

“Then the First Woman will remain aboard. If the ship can withstand the escape, I'll contact you.” The two exchanged a salute.

Then the captain quietly gave his orders.

“Contact the lifeboat station. Lifeboat One, prepare for escape.”

“This way, Lorraine!” Daiga carried the girl as he moved down the passageway.
But they made no progress. Each time the ship rocked, they slammed into the wall.
“Dai-chan, this...”
“No, it's not your fault!” Daiga shouted, lifting Lorraine up.
“Even if they were targeting you, it's the Demon Clan's fault! Don't think about that now!” But the tattoo's laughter still clung to Daiga's eardrums.
The moment it laughed, a sandstorm had erupted. While the tattoo was indeed the trigger, Daiga didn't want Lorraine to blame herself.
“Oops, looks like you're having trouble over there too.” Zett jumped out from behind a passageway. Behind him were Dr. Grant and Assistant Sykes.
Daiga glanced at the three of them and caught his breath.
“Yeah. We got orders to abandon ship in the lifeboats.”

“Same here. The boarding gate that connects directly to the ship is too damaged to use. The order is for everyone who looks like they might be targeted to go to the main pier.” Behind Zett, who said this, Dr. Grant covered his mouth.
“Zett, take me to that lifeboat quickly. Otherwise, I'll suffocate before we can escape. The contents of my stomach are rising to my throat.”
“I... I can't hold it anymore either. Ugh!” Assistant Sykes also covered his mouth and groaned. “I'm sorry, but I can't hold it any longer...”
“No, no, no, Sykes! If you throw up, I'll follow suit... Ugh!”
Seeing the two turn pale, Lorraine made up her mind and rushed over.
“Are you okay? I'll rub your back.” Lorraine's face was pale too, but she rubbed Sykes' broad back with all her might.
Zett grimaced on the tilted passageway. “In my next life, I'll get seasick too. Then I can get treated by a beautiful nurse.”
“This is no time for jokes! Let's go!” Daiga practically dragged Lorraine and Sykes as he sprinted forward.
The research vessel Critias had five lifeboats on each side - each could hold one hundred people and was normally secured by a crane.
One of them, the first lifeboat, was already lowered to the gangway.
“Daiga, Zett, hurry!” Major Hadley, who had been standing by, held an MP7 SD9 submachine gun in his hand. “We're disembarking too. It's safer to evacuate to the main pier.”
The members of Team Ascalon, fully armed, had also deployed around the lifeboat.
A fierce sandstorm was blowing against their bodies - as soon as Daiga stepped out onto the gangway, he was baptized by it.
“Ouch! These sand grains are sharp enough to cut my skin!”
“It's rougher than the sandstorms in Carthage.” Zett shielded Dr. Grant with his back and grimaced.
However, Lorraine was the only one looking beyond the sandstorm.
The lights of Yokohama had disappeared, revealing a vicious fire.
“Daiga, the city...!” Hearing her words, Daiga also looked in that direction.
Strong winds fanned the flames, spreading the fire in all directions.
The sound of fire truck sirens could be heard coming from the same place.
The roads must have been blocked, preventing them from getting anywhere.
“Lorraine, our first priority is to escape.” Daiga said, suppressing his fury.
“If things have come to this then our strength alone won't be enough. Come on, hurry.”
“Uh... yeah.” Just as Lorraine nodded, the Critias tilted sharply.
The bow lifted in the fierce wind, transforming the passageway into a steep slope.
Daiga grabbed the rail on one side and scooped Lorraine up with his other arm.
“Damn it! How are we supposed to lower the lifeboat like this?!”
But his eyes fixed on the sandstorm bearing down.
Yellow sand approached from above, swirling in the air as it closed in rapidly - as it neared the hull, it transformed into countless dolls.
Sand grains formed long hair, delicate faces, ample breasts, and long legs.
Naked women made of dust flew through the night sky, attacking Daiga and the others.

“Everyone, take cover!” Still holding Lorraine, Daiga dashed into the passageway.
As the sandstorm witches whizzed overhead, grit struck his cheek.
Several Ascalon crew members took the full brunt of the assault, tumbling overboard into the sea.
“So they did attack after all!” Hadley unleashed three bursts from his submachine gun.
But the bullets passed clean through the witch's body, earning him nothing but mocking laughter.
“They're immune to bullets!” Zett shouted, releasing chakrams from both hips.
The ring-shaped blades flashed in the darkness, pincering the witch swarm from both sides - but even that throw took the full brunt of the sideways gale.
The chakrams lost momentum, falling to the passageway with a hollow clatter.
“Tch, don't think I'll give up that easily!” Zett reached for something else on his belt.
But Daiga shouted over his shoulder. “Get back, Zett! Beating back this ambush is a bad idea!”
“What?!”
“Fighting while protecting Lorraine and the Doctor is disadvantageous too! Protect everyone and get back inside the ship!”
The enemy had attacked knowing that Daiga and the others would be disembarking.
With the deck swaying and poor visibility, counterattacking was difficult.
Yet, in stark contrast to Daiga's calmness, Zett's fighting spirit burned fiercely.
“Shut up, I'll kill these bastards myself!” Zett declared in a stubborn voice.
“Watch from there! You're not the only one who can fight the demon horde!”
The Sandstorm Witches swarmed and attacked Zett.
Already upon him. Yellow arms wrapped around his limbs, but Zett, using the railing for support, spun around. “Challenging a Carthaginian with sand? That's laughable!”
Chakrams shot from both hands once more. But again, they seemed destined to slice through air - yet fired at point-blank range, this time they sliced through the witch's body.
Not only that. The spinning cutting rings embedded in the witch exploded violently. Sand grains forming her upper body were blown away, and one witch vanished.
“My chakrams come in various types, you see.” Zett stroked the spinning cutting ring holders lined up at his waist. “That one had viscous explosives coated on the blade edge. Once drawn from the holder, it detonates in five seconds.”
Then, he hooked another chakram onto each finger - Zett Hannibal cut through the swarm of witches. “The minions are just fodder. The one I want to meet is the witch master manipulating you lot.”
But with the witches' cackling, the bow of the Critias rose once more.
Zett, his hands occupied, lost his balance completely. “Damn it!”
Zett fell into the passageway, the chakram off in an unexpected direction.
Taking advantage of this, the witches swarmed in, but Daiga sprang to his feet swiftly.
“Don't let go of the railing, Lorraine!” Daiga unleashed a blue flash from his back.
Enveloped in the wings of Seiryu, he instantly darted between Zett and the witches.
Swinging his arm, he simultaneously summoned the Suzaku Blade.

He sliced the foremost witch clean in two. “The master's hordes are watching somewhere! If you show weakness, they'll strike!”
That thought felt eerily unsettling to Daiga - the demon had yet to reveal itself.
The one who commands bats. The one who commands sandstorms. If separate, then there should be two entities in the horde. This was no time to be troubled by minions.
“Are you telling me to listen to your opinion?! You seem to think you saved me, but that's not—” Just as Zett shouted, the stern of the Critias rose up.
The slope of the passageway reversed, and cries of agony echoed from the people crawling on the floor. Among them... “H-Hey, Doctor! What the—!”
Assistant Sykes slid down the slope toward the bow.
His round body kicked up a cloud of dust as he crashed into the railing.
But then, his body slipped through the railing, his lower half dangling off the ship.
“H-help me! I'm falling!”
“W-what are you doing at a time like this!” Dr. Grant cursed and slid down after his assistant. But suddenly, a Sand Witch appeared in his path.
She stretched out her arm made of sand and gravel, and this time, the doctor screamed.
“No! Help me! Zett! Daiga!” Once again, Daiga flew through the air. He jumped over the slope and crushed the witch sideways.
However, Dr. Grant, still carrying momentum, slipped through the railing.
Below was the sea surface. But the doctor's arms were barely clutching the railing.
“No! This kind of strenuous exercise is too much for me...!”
“Wait, I'll get you...!” The witch pounced on Daiga's back as he shouted. She then wrapped her arms and legs around him.
Daiga glanced back over his shoulder. “Zett! Hadley!”
But there was no one who could go to help the doctors.
The Sandstorm Witch's minions seemed to spring forth endlessly, one after another.
Zett, of course, and the entire Team Ascalon were all restrained.
Only one person, a slender girl, slid down the passageway.
“Doctor! Mr. Sykes! I'm coming!” Lorraine slid toward the bow.
But it was too reckless. She was too defenseless.
“No, Lorraine! Come back!” But faster than Daiga's voice, Lorraine had reached the two of them - quickly, she pulled Dr. Grant's arm up.
“Hang in there, Doctor! Come on, hurry!”
“I'm sorry, Ms. Lorraine... Ugh!” Lorraine braced her feet against the slanted floor and managed to pull the doctor out. Next, the two of them grabbed Sykes' arms tightly.
“Mr. Sykes, this might hurt a little!”
“Thank you... Ah, but it really hurts!”
“Could you pull your belly in a bit? Like this, it's impossible...”
Lorraine and the Doctor tried to pull Sykes' body free from the railing, but Sykes could only turn bright red, unable to move. Then, unnoticed, sand and gravel began gathering around them.
“Lorraine, run! You can't stay there...!” But Daiga's cry went unheard.
The sandstorm swirling around Lorraine and the others intensified into a whirlwind.
In an instant, it engulfed them and tore away part of the ship's bow.

“Dai-chan!” Lorraine's scream was swallowed by the tornado. “Get out of the way!”
Along with the torn-away debris of the passageway, the three were sucked up into the night sky. They rose rapidly, swallowed by the starless darkness.
Daiga's fist smashed through the clinging witches. But the sand women escaped into the night sky, smiling as if to say their purpose was achieved.
Immediately, Daiga tried to pursue them with Seiryu’s wings.
But Lorraine was nowhere to be seen.
Before Daiga, only a wall of sand and dust stood in the way.

“What on earth is happening in Yokohama?”
The Prime Minister groaned in the government office conference room.
“Is it true there are numerous casualties?”
“It is true, Prime Minister. A considerable number of evacuees have already fled that sandstorm. Based on their accounts, tens of thousands are believed to be left behind.”
The Chief Cabinet Secretary pointed at the NHK news footage. Interviews with victims. Interspersed between them were images of the yellow sandstorm.
The Prime Minister involuntarily rose from his seat.
“Is this the work of the demonic swarm... Yokohama must be devastated!”
“What the hell is the Ziegen Agency doing, Sakimizu!”
The Minister of Internal Affairs slammed his fist on the conference table.
“I hear they're in Yokohama right now. If the demonic swarm targeted them, doesn't the Ziegen Agency share responsibility for this!?”
“We still haven't made contact with Assistant Inspector Sakimizu.”
The National Public Safety Commission Chairman adjusted his glasses.
“We've urgently requested the Kanagawa Prefectural Police Headquarters—with whom we've barely managed to establish contact—to confirm the safety of the Critias, but they themselves have yet to reach the Grand Pier.”
As the Cabinet members fell silent, the Prime Minister's right cheek twitched.
“Under Directive B, I order the defense forces to mobilize.”
The Prime Minister turned his gaze to the Minister of Justice.
“Declare a state of emergency in Kanagawa Prefecture, adjacent Tokyo Metropolis, and Chiba Prefecture across the bay. Prohibit civilian use of major roads until further notice. Implement traffic control with police reinforcements from Kanto prefectures.”
“All Self-Defense Forces units, commence operations immediately. However, prioritize the protection of victims at this stage.” At his command, three men in uniform stood up.
“The First Division in Nerima and the Air Mobility Brigade in Narashino will undertake victim rescue operations.”
“The C-160 Transport Squadron is also on standby for similar duties. We request permission to seal off the coastal highway and use it as a runway for transport aircraft.”
“Understood. Proceed according to Directive B, but do not let your guard down.”

The Prime Minister's voice carried an unusual tension.
“After all, no one can say for certain that sandstorm won't expand.”
The Prime Minister nodded to the Chiefs of Staff of the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces. The shoulders of the bowing chiefs of staff trembled slightly.

Daiga gazed at the sky from the bridge of the Critias.
It was past four in the morning. By now, the sun should have risen - yet the storm showed no sign of abating. Black smoke blanketed the sky, making the surroundings feel like the dead of night.
“Communications still aren't restored,” Reiko said, removing her headphones.
“But it seems the Self-Defense Forces and police have crossed the sandstorm barrier and reached the disaster sites. Full-scale rescue operations have begun.”
“Does that make you feel any better? It's been eight hours since then.”
Daiga slammed his fist into his palm.
“The demon horde has Lorraine. That should be enough time to start that ritual.”
“Are you saying the ritual space has been constructed?”
“What else could it be, Hadley?”
What came to Daiga’s mind was the battle against the Heavenly Demon Gentsu.
The ritual using Lorraine as the gateway. That's why the horde came.
They hadn't given up after all.
“Still don't know Lorraine's location?”
“We're searching for her now. She has a mobile video communicator too, so don't panic.”
Reiko called up footage of central Yokohama on the holographic display.
“The Heavenly Demon Gents chose the basement of Tsukiji as their ritual space. It might be underground again this time. We're focusing our search on the underground malls and the Minatomirai Line station area.”
“Then we'd be faster going to look for her directly.”
Just as Daiga was about to leave Funabashi, a long leg shot out, blocking his path.
“Then I'm coming too. Where Miss Lorraine is, the demon horde might be too.”
Zett leaned against the wall and said. “I'll take down the demons. I'm not the kind of guy to let you steal the glory.”
“Do whatever you want. I just want to save Lorraine first.” Daiga answered wearily.
“That's my mission. I'll let you have the demon's head.”
“Daiga, it seems you've misunderstood something.” Zett frowned in exasperation.
“You don't even understand your own mission? You were born into the bloodline destined to defeat the Demon Horde. Naturally, shouldn't defeating the Demon Horde be your top priority above all else?” Daiga sensed a sharpness in his tone.
Zett's face bore his usual defiant smile, but it looked almost like a fake mask.
“So you're saying I should fight the Demon Horde even if it means abandoning Lorraine?”
“I never said that. She's such a wonderful...”
“Shut up. You're all sweet talk now, but you'd cut her loose when push comes to shove, wouldn't you?”

"Cut it out. I'm not as cold-blooded as Major Hadley. Miss Lorraine is just as worried as you are."
Zett said with an elusive smile.
Daiga directed his anger at Major Hadley. “Hadley... Has the Ziegen Agency changed its mind?”
“Don't doubt us, Daiga. I believe abandoning Lorraine is impossible.” Hadley stared straight at Daiga.
“Because you're here, Daiga. You're the only one who won't abandon Lorraine until the very end. Even if it means turning your blade against us, you'd save Lorraine. So abandoning Lorraine? That choice is pointless from the start.”
Beside him, Reiko nodded silently.
After a pause, Daiga turned back to Zett. “I'm going.”
“Understood. And I'll prove my words to her aren't just empty flattery.”
Just then, the communication line carried a faint voice.
Simultaneously, a distorted image appeared on the holographic display.
“.....Dai-chan… Reiko-san.....”
“Lorraine! Where are you now?!” Daiga lunged at the screen, straining his eyes.
Gradually, Lorraine's image flickered into view, broken and distorted.
“Right now... I'm at... the Landmark…”

“Hey, can you hear me, Reiko?” Lorraine spoke into the mobile video communicator Reiko had given her.
“I'm at Landmark Tower right now. With Dr. Grant and Mr. Sykes.”
Lorraine pointed the camera attached to the mobile video communicator at the two men.
Grant waved, and Sykes bowed his head.
They were huddled together on the partially collapsed terrace of a cafe.
“I'm not sure how... but when I woke up, the three of us were here. Yes, probably right next to Dockyard Gardens.” Lorraine looked around.
“There's a sandstorm, so we haven't gone outside. There's no one around. I haven't seen anyone since I woke up.”
“Let me have a moment with them.” Dr. Grant took the communicator.
"Yeah, it's me. Looks like we're in a huge shopping center. It's pretty much collapsed, but no disaster has struck. Yeah, strangely enough, I'm not hurt at all."
He coughed as sand blew into his mouth. “Anyway, come and get us out of here quickly. I'm feeling very uneasy.”
“Lorraine, stay where you are!” Suddenly, Daiga appeared on the screen of her mobile video communicator. “I'm coming right now! Let me know immediately if anything happens!”
“Okay. I'll be waiting, Dai-chan.” Lorraine hung up and breathed a sigh of relief.
“It's okay now. Dai-chan will definitely come flying over.”
“He certainly looked desperate. Daiga's voice pierced my ears!”
Then, Dr. Grant peered into the cafe terrace.
“It's breakfast time, but are you feeling up to eating anything?”
“No, not right now...”

“I figured. I'm still feeling seasick myself. Let's rest until Daiga and the others arrive.”
With that, the doctor slumped down.

“I'm running to Lorraine's place!”
Daiga grabbed the door handle of the ship bridge.
“We’re not that far to Landmark Tower. Send a rescue VTOL when the weather clears up!”
“Take it with you, Daiga!” Reiko hurriedly tossed him the mobile video communicator.
“Don't let your guard down! The demon horde is still out there somewhere!”
“Got it. You handle the rear!” Daiga caught the communicator and dashed into the passageway. But Zett immediately followed close behind.
“I said I'm coming too. Didn't you hear me?”
“Then don't fall behind. I want to get to Lorraine's place quickly.”
“You seem pretty anxious. I thought hearing her voice would have reassured you.”
At Zett's words, Daiga stopped and sighed. “It's the opposite. It made me even more worried.”
“What do you mean?”
“Did you hear what Lorraine said? She said there's no one around.”
“So what?”
“The Landmark Tower is usually full of people.” Daiga said irritably.
“The sandstorm hit around eight in the evening. That place is close to shopping malls and amusement parks... and it was a summer vacation Saturday, for crying out loud. How many people do you think were caught in there?” I doubt they all escaped. But they said there was no fire - you can't seriously think every single one of them burned to death.”
“Then...”
“To perform the ritual, the Heavenly Demon Gents needed to undergo a transformation. To do so, he consumed a large number of humans as sacrifices. This demon probably did the same now.”
Zett narrowed his eyes beneath his sunglasses. “So, a ritual space was created in the Landmark Tower, and the sacrifices have already been offered...”
“In the worst case? Yes. And since I'm fighting the Demon Horde, I always consider the worst.” Daiga truly pounded Zett's chest.
“I've got that kind of resolve too. You're one of the only three in the world who can defeat Demons, right? There's no time for complacency.” Daiga said this and started to run off.
But Zett stood frozen for a moment, gazing up at the sky.
“What are you doing, Zett? Hurry up.”
“I've got new respect for you. You're truly a man who once defeated a Demon.”
Then Zett smiled, as if resigned. “I thought you'd be all fired up about Lorraine being taken, but you're surprisingly calm.”
“What, you're trying to flatter me up too?”
“It's a serious opinion. Since I'm being serious, I'll confess something.”
Zett cleared his throat once. “I've never actually defeated a Demon.”

“What?”
“I've killed undead. But I've never once fought a Demon.” Daiga stared intently at Zett's smiling face.
As always, his face gave nothing away. “The skills you’ve shown while fighting the bats and the sand witches were the real thing. You got the skills to do so…”
“Yeah, I want to believe I can. And I have a reason to want to defeat them.”
“Can you tell me that reason?”
“Well, I wonder...” Zett tilted his head, as if questioning himself.
“If possible, I could tell you. Though I don't have much time.”
“Doesn't sound like a topic you can discuss while running.”
“We don't need to run. I'll spare you the physical strain. Even if a car's out of the question, a bike can get through the roads. I'll drive. Follow me”, Zet said, stepping ahead.
He was still just as much of an enigma as before to Daiga.

The redevelopment of the Minato Mirai district began in the 1980s - hotels, amusement parks, and shopping centers were built in the waterfront area bordering Yokohama Port, establishing it as a major tourist destination. But it didn't stop there. By attracting government offices and major corporate headquarters, the area also transformed into a functional subcenter.
The Landmark Tower stands as the symbol of this Minato Mirai district - this 70-story, 296-meter skyscraper houses offices and a hotel, and at its base lay a place called Dockyard Garden.
The former shipbuilding dock had been converted into an event venue.
Lorraine and the others were holding their breath in that Dockyard Garden.
The area was deathly quiet; not a sound could be heard.
“You seem calm, Lorraine. Aren't you scared?”
“I am scared... but I'm okay because Dai-chan is on his way.”
“Well, I guess I am too. I can wait because he told us to wait here. Otherwise, I'd want to get out of here right now. Though there’s a sandstorm outside...”
Dr. Grant gripped the mineral water bottle he had picked up.
“What about you, Mr. Sykes? You don't seem to have eaten anything?”
“Yes, I'm feeling fine now...” Sykes had been grimacing in pain for a while now.
Noticing this, Lorraine looked him over.
“Mr. Sykes, are you hurt somewhere?”
“My ankle's been hurting for a while now...”
“Let me see it. It's your right foot, right?”
The moment Lorraine touched his ankle, Sykes let out a high-pitched scream.
“Th-there! Ouch!”
“Quiet, Sykes. We're in the heart of demon territory.”
“Probably cracked. Did this happen when you slipped on the ship?”
“It just started hurting now. Maybe because I relaxed?”
Lorraine stood up and scanned the surroundings.
“I'll go find a first aid kit. We need to apply a poultice or something.”

“Don't be ridiculous. You're staying here.” Dr. Grant choked on his mineral water.
“Daiga-kun told you not to leave here, didn't he?” At those words, Lorraine showed a momentary sign of hesitation - but something stronger awakened within her.
“But I can't just leave Mr. Sykes like this. I'm going.” Sykes shook his head at her firm resolve. “It's okay for me. I can hold out until help arrives.”
“No, it's not. I'm still aspiring to be a nurse. I'll be right back.”
Lorraine pressed her lips tightly together and ran off.
“Wait for me, Mr. Sykes!”
“Hey, are you really going?! Wait, I said wait!”
Fuming, Dr. Grant followed after her.
Lorraine paid no attention and dashed into Landmark Plaza.

Landmark Plaza is a five-story shopping mall - it has an atrium structure from the first to the fifth floor, lined with countless stores.
Lorraine rushed to the floor indicator on the first floor and smiled. “Oh, good. The pharmacy is on the first floor.”
She confirmed the route and climbed over the collapsed wall materials.
Grant, who was following behind, called out to her in a trembling voice.
“Be more careful, Ms. Lorraine! Oh, watch your step!” The display windows around them were shattered, and merchandise was scattered everywhere.
A handbag lying on the floor seemed to belong to someone.
But no matter how far they went, there was not a soul in sight.
“I wonder if everyone who was here evacuated?” As she said this, Lorraine suddenly stumbled. She stopped as soon as she turned the corner, noticing something.
Thanks to that, Grant was finally able to catch up to the girl.
“It's dangerous to go so fast. Let's take a look around a little more first...”
“...I am looking, Doctor.” Lorraine said in a stunned voice.
“This... could it be...” Grant also lost his voice.
It was the central atrium on the first floor, an event space with a double-height ceiling.
In winter, it was famous for its enormous Christmas tree - but now it had transformed into a majestic amphitheater. Seating rows were neatly arranged surrounding the protruding stage. The pillars were solidly built, with VIP boxes even prepared on the second floor - and suspended from the ceiling hung a gigantic chandelier.
Yet all of it was utterly devoid of beauty.
The stage, the pillars, the seats, the chandelier—all were formed from yellow flesh.
The entire theater oozed yellow pus, writhing and squirming.
Yellow pus flowed onto the floor, and the smell of decay hung in the air.
“It's similar to the footage from when you were captured...”
Dr. Grant also noticed the strange changes around them.
“It looks like some kind of opera house, but no matter how I think about it...”
“A ritual space for the demonic horde...” Lorraine looked up at the pillars of the theater.
She recognized the strange characters densely carved into them.
They were the same characters that the Heavenly Demon, Gentsu, had summoned from his mouth. Lorraine took a step back.

“I have to tell Dai-chan... this place is dangerous.”
“Escaping is more important than that.” Dr. Grant said, looking around.
“This really is a place we shouldn't have come to. Come on, hurry.”
“Y-yes...” Lorraine nodded and took another step back.
Tentatively, she took another step, trying not to make a sound.
But then, suddenly, the girl stopped walking.
“Miss Lorraine, what's wrong?”
Dr. Grant, who was trying to escape, turned around.
But by then, Lorraine had already started walking toward the stage.
“W-where are you going...!” Dr. Grant shouted desperately.
“Miss Lorraine, you mustn't go! Can't you hear me?”
The doctor rushed forward, trying to bring the girl back.
But at that moment, the stage began to glow.
Overwhelmed by the flash, Dr. Grant went to his knees.
Lorraine, on the other hand, steps onto the stage as if guided by the light.
Then she slowly looks up at the swaying chandelier of flesh.
“Miss Lorraine!” Suddenly, the girl's body jerks and convulses.
Lorraine collapses at her feet. Her beautiful blonde hair fell into the filthy pus.
Her outstretched arms grasped at the sky, not moving even slightly.
Only one thing moved – on her skin. The tattoo woman appeared, as if she had been waiting for this moment. Her laughter echoed throughout the theater, shaking it with joy.

【Chapter 3】

“I know I told you to go fast!” Clinging to Zett's waist, Daiga shouted.
“But this is TOO fast! You trying to shake me off or something!?”
“If you get shaken off, Daiga, then you're only as good as you were up to that point!”
Zett, riding the bike, answered triumphantly. “The bike is testing your strength too. It's a fine machine, much like me, isn't it?”
Painted silver and jet black, it was a monster machine from Triumph - a Road Rocket V, boasting a 3000cc displacement. Its solid, weighty form roared through the streets of Yokohama. Though the streets were still littered with wrecked vehicles, Zett weaved through them with ease.
Like a steel steed galloping through the city. Its classic shape held not a hint of datedness, only beauty - but to Daiga, the deep rumble of the engine was nothing but a painful noise in his ears.

“Damn, that bike's loud. Isn't it electric or hydrogen-powered?”
"If you ask me, a bike that doesn't make noise isn't a bike at all. Only by guzzling gas and spewing roars and vibrations - is it truly a motorcycle?"
“These days, bikes that spew exhaust are rare.”
“Say what you will. I'm a biker who's tough on the planet.”
Daiga looked on in disbelief, surveying the burning city of Yokohama.
Beyond the fire trucks spraying water, survivors moved in orderly lines.
People seeking help gathered around the ambulances.
“Hurry, take my child to the hospital!”
“It's too late. Wait for the next ambulance!”
“How long do you expect us to wait? No rescue is coming!”
The screams pierced his ears more than the roar of the bikes.
The voices lingering in his eardrums made Daiga clench his molars.
“...These people are gonna hate us.”
“You're being weak. Miss Lorraine seemed to want you to stop blaming yourself.”

Inside a burning passenger car by the roadside lay a charred corpse.
On the roadside, a figure lay collapsed, likely from inhaling black smoke.
“At least avenge my comrades. That's my mission.”
“You seem to have forgotten, but I'd like you to leave defeating the demon horde to me.”
Zett said this while turning the steering wheel. “This will be my first prey, so I want to take it down myself.” And then the Lord Rocket V came to a stop.
Before them stood the Landmark Tower - the skyscraper towering within the sandstorm resembled the Tower of Babel.
But Daiga didn't even glance at its imposing form, fixing his gaze on Zett instead.
“I don't care to hear why you want to defeat the Demons.” Daiga reflected on his own past. “I have my own reasons for fighting the demon horde. You must have your own compelling reasons for battling those monsters too. But if I asked why, I'd inevitably have to touch on your past.” Daiga cut himself off.
“If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to force yourself.”
“Don't talk like you know everything.” Zet responded with a sneer.
“I don't have a past like yours. I don't feel any guilt about it, either.”
“Then why...”
“I just don't want to miss a chance like this.” Zett stated it bluntly.
“You see, Daiga, I was discovered by your father, Colonel Dietrich. I was trained from childhood as an anti-demon combat specialist, utilizing my innate vision.”
“.....”
“And if the demon hordes ever truly moved, I intended to be the first to crush them - but look at that. The honor of being the first human to defeat a Heavenly Demon wasn't mine. It was yours, Daiga Hououji.”
Daiga furrowed his brow at the unexpected words. “That doesn't matter...”
“It matters to me, Daiga. The Ziegen Agency, and nations across the world, see you as a savior. But me...?” Zett trailed off, his words catching in his throat.
"... They see me as your sidekick. I’m not." Then he turned on his heel.
“I've said too much. Let's go. She's waiting.”
“Hey, Zett!” But the self-proclaimed Carthagenian had already fallen silent.
His retreating back carried an aura that repelled others.
“Daiga-san, Zett-san!” Sykes limped out of the building.
But he immediately collapsed, and Zett rushed over to him.
“Are you hurt, Sykes?”
“Yes... I heard the sound of a motorcycle, so I knew it must be you, Zett-san.”
“Hey, what about Lorraine?” Daiga looked around.
“And Dr. Grant isn't here either.”
“Actually, when she found out about my injury, she went to look for medicine...”
“How reckless,” Zett spat out. “She doesn't understand how dangerous this place is. It's like being in a witch's cauldron.”
“I'm sorry, I tried to stop her.”
“Wow,you’d think she’d listen to what Daiga said at least.”
Upon hearing this, Daiga checked his wristwatch. The light point indicating Lorraine was indeed lit within Landmark Plaza.

“No, Lorraine was just worried about him.” Daiga offered his shoulder to help Sykes stand up. “No matter how dangerous the situation, she won't give up on saving someone. Lorraine has her own way of doing things.”

But Daiga felt uneasy at the unnatural scene - he had seen countless fires and innumerable victims on his way here, but upon reaching this area around the Landmark, there was no sign of life whatsoever.

Even the amusement park before them was swept only by swirling dust.

“You stay here and wait for backup.” Daiga seated Sykes on the stone steps and said.

“Zett and I are going to search for them. How long ago did they go out?”

“Fifteen minutes... no, maybe longer.”

“I see. We need to rescue them while we still have their location signal. It's getting dangerous.” Daiga turned his gaze to Zett. “Let's go. Don't let your guard down.”

“That's what I'd like to say. You're the one letting your guard down.”

Zett glanced down at Sykes. “Why don't you consider that Sykes might be one of the demons?”

“Wh-what do you mean, Zett?”

“Your clumsy actions are unnatural. Wasn't it you who drew Miss Lorraine to yourself on the ship and brought her here?”

Daiga was momentarily speechless. “You're overthinking it, Zett.”

“How can you say that? How can you be certain Miss Lorraine left of her own accord? Her unnatural behavior makes perfect sense if this man is a Demon Clan member.”

Sykes stood up, trembling. “I... I admit I'm useless. I've caused nothing but trouble. But the Demon Clan...?”

“You're a member of the Ziegen Institute too. You should understand her importance. Yet letting her go alone? That's an unnaturally reckless decision.”

“Are you saying I've become an Undead or something?”

“If that were the case, we'd find out immediately. But if a Demon is disguised, we wouldn't be able to tell.” The timid scientist could barely get his voice out anymore.

Even so, Zett couldn't shake his doubts. “There's already a trap inside the building. They'll lure us in when we let our guard down. The demon horde would use tricks like that. Or can you prove your innocence, Sykes?”

“Cut it out, Zett. No one can prove their innocence.” Daiga snapped, irritated.

“Things might be getting worse while we argue. I'm going.”

“What if there really is a trap?”

“If there is, I'll bite through it. That's all.” He looked at Sykes. It was true; suspicion seemed inevitable.

But Daiga remembered the ‘Coming Race’ - even if you fall into suspicion and doubt, in the end, you have to see the truth for yourself.

“I believe his words.” Daiga looked at Sykes.

“Lorraine throwing herself into danger isn't an unnatural thing for her to do. She's exactly the type to do it. And once she starts running, no one can stop Lorraine. Not even me.”

“You seem pretty confident.”

“I know her better than anyone.” Daiga took a deep breath and looked at Sykes.
“I'm going then. Wait here.”
“...Then let me come with you.” Sykes suddenly spoke with resolve.
“That's the only way to clear the doubt. I'm coming too.”
“You're injured. Don't do this.” Daiga argued calmly.
“Right now, you'll just slow us down. I trust you, so stay here.”
“No, you don't trust me either, Daiga-san.”
“What do you mean?”
“The one you trust is Lorraine-san. Not my words.” Sykes' eyes, brimming with tears, were red and bloodshot. It was the desperate face of someone who had lost trust and was trying desperately to regain it.
Even so, Daiga made Sykes sit down where he was. “You can earn back that trust by doing your original mission. When Lorraine comes back, find a way to remove that tattoo of hers, okay?”
“Daiga-san...”
“Cut the formalities. You're older than me, aren't you?” Sykes was left speechless.
Seeing him like that, Zett sighed wearily. “Well then, whether your decision turns out for good or ill...”
“Zett, you need to stop doubting him already...”
Suddenly, Daiga looked up at the sky. A sense of something. But no killing intent.
Then, beyond the sandstorm, a white silhouette became visible.
“An airplane...?” He thought that for an instant. But it was unusually small.
A flying object, resembling a model airplane with a disproportionately large head, passed overhead.
"That's an unmanned reconnaissance drone from the Ground Self-Defense Force. A long-range type. It's equipped with artificial intelligence and transmits camera footage to the operator."
Daiga turned toward Zett. “Huh... So they came to probe the situation inside the sandstorm.”
“The Japanese government is worried too. Whoa, another one's coming.”
The number of unmanned reconnaissance drones gradually increased, swarming like a cloud of dragonflies. But Daiga ignored them, stepping into Landmark Plaza.
“None of my concern right now. I'm moving on.” At that instant, an explosion roared overhead.
One after another, the unmanned reconnaissance drones turned into fireballs mid-air.
One flying low caught Daiga with the shockwave from it’s blast.
“Wh-what the hell?!” Daiga leapt into the plaza, clutching a screaming Sykes.
Downed drones slammed into the ground, their impact shattering shop windows.
A strange engine roar followed.
“A fighter jet?” A cross-shaped silhouette streaked across the ground.
Unfazed by the sandstorm, it climbed alongside the giant Ferris wheel.
It pursued the fleeing unmanned reconnaissance drone at high speed, firing its machine guns.
Daiga finally grasped its true nature. “Impossible, that's...!”

A propeller fighter plane was flying over Yokohama in the year 2020.

“This is footage of the enemy fighter. It was taken by the Ground Self-Defense Force conducting rescue operations at the scene.”
At the Chief of Staff's voice, the cabinet members all leaned forward in their chairs.
The brown camouflaged aircraft was indeed a single-seat propeller fighter.
Its data was instantly displayed on the screen.
“It's a Messerschmitt Me 109E!” The Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications shouted, and the Chairman of the Joint Staff also read the display.
“That's right. It's a fighter that was active about 80 years ago. It was the most popular fighter used by the German army in the early stages of World War II, but...”
The swastika was conspicuously painted on the fuselage. The data on the ghostly fighter was also listed instantly. “The engine is a Daimler-Benz DB 601N, with an output of 1,200 horsepower. It is equipped with two 20mm cannons and two 7.92mm machine guns.” The Chairman continued.
“Furthermore, dust filters can be confirmed on the sides of the fuselage. That is the heat-resistant type deployed on the North African front.”
“It must be one of the demonic group. If so, it's not just a propeller plane.”
The Prime Minister turned his attention to the Yokohama rescue schedule.
“The Self-Defense Forces on site...” He clenched his fist, staring intently at the images. “Order the fire department to evacuate immediately.”
“And issue a warning to the units en route to Yokohama. Aircraft carrying evacuees won't stand a chance if attacked.”
On the situation display, unmanned reconnaissance drones were being shot down one after another.
The Minister of Internal Affairs clenched his fist. “Who the hell are these Nazi ghosts doing this?!”

“Run, Zett!”
Zett kicked up sand as he ran toward the screaming Daiga.
The ghost aircraft flew in furiously, firing its cannons and machine guns simultaneously.
“That’s quite the old weapon they got there!” Zett kicked off the stone steps to dodge the cannon fire, then spun around to escape the machine gun fire.
He rolled into the plaza, and the fighter plane gave up and ascended.
“Hmph. They can’t get us inside. It's just a threat.”
“I wouldn't say that – we’ll need to come out once we leave, no?”
Daiga took out his mobile video communicator. “Reiko, can you hear me? Be careful when sending VTOLs for backup. We're under attack by Messerschmitts right now.”
“Messerschmitts?” Reiko's eyes widened as she appeared on the communicator's screen.
“Why would those aircraft be here now...”
“How should I know? They probably want to show off that they're Nazis too.”
“But... VTOLs are incomparable in terms of speed and weaponry...”
That was true if you thought about it logically.

Daiga looked up at the sky through the broken shop window.
He confirmed the aircraft circling leisurely above the Ferris wheel and regulated his breathing. “Tell Hadley. The enemy is the Star of Africa. If you're British too, this is your chance to avenge the enemy from eighty years ago!”
Ending the conversation, Daiga offered his shoulder to Sykes.
“As long as he's out there, waiting outside is impossible. Come with us.”
“I-I'm sorry to trouble you.”
Zett, following behind, looked at Daiga curiously. “Hey, you don't happen to know what that fighter plane is, do you?”
“Yeah. Did you see the serial number on that fighter?”
“It said ‘14’. So what?”
“That means it's the 14th aircraft in the squadron. Except German squadrons are only twelve planes strong. A 14th plane doesn't actually exist.”
Zett stopped in the shadows. “That guy's got some nerve.”
"Look who's talking. But there's only one pilot like that. And a tropical version... That's Captain Hans Joachim Marseille, the ace of aces from the North African campaign." Daiga said, stepping over the wreckage.
“Back then, he ran rampant against the British. Final tally was 158 kills, I think. He was quite the looker, apparently idol-level popular in Germany at the time.”
“I'm the type who can't tolerate any other handsome men besides myself.”
“But he suffered engine trouble on his return flight and perished at the young age of twenty-two... Still, he didn't have to come back as a ghost.”
Advancing cautiously, Daiga sighed. “Sheesh... Not only Bormann, but even Captain Marseille has become a Demon.”
“Daiga-san, you're quite knowledgeable. Did you read that in Nazi documents too?”
Sykes' words made Daiga pause for a moment.
A familiar voice echoed deep within his mind.
“No... I heard it from someone long ago.”
“Who on earth...” Daiga covered Sykes's mouth with his hand before he could finish.
Before them lay a vast shopping mall.
Though it had an open-air structure, the lights were out, and the area was dark.
Whether from the sandstorm's impact or not, the stores were nearly destroyed.
It was hard to imagine any survivors. But...
Rustle, rustle, rustle... Countless presences stirred around them.
Tweet, tweet, tweet... The faint chirping gradually spread.
“It's too dark for my snake eyes to be of any use.”
Zett realized this too, clenching something in both hands.
“But if that's their goal, then it's a wasted effort!”
He threw it with all his might—a flash grenade.
It slammed into the walls on both sides, creating an artificial sun.
Light-emitting gel also scattered from within, instantly illuminating the area. Sykes, finally realizing what was happening, let out a faint, strained scream. “Th-th-th-this... AAAAHHHH!”
The surrounding walls were completely black, horrifically writhing.

Looking closer, the area was densely packed with bats clinging to the walls.
Thousands, tens of thousands... an innumerable swarm screeched in unison.
“...These bastards again!” Daiga shielded Sykes with his back, his blood boiling.
This horde dwarfed the attack aboard the ship.
If they lost blood to this many enemies, defeat was certain.
But as Daiga braced himself, his gaze locked onto a figure rising from the rubble.
“Hououji Daiga.” The voice belonged to a muscular giant - a half-naked man clad only in a loincloth. “...I've been waiting for you.”
His skin was copper-red. His pupil-less eyes glowed pure white.
His disheveled black hair hung down to his back, reminiscent of an ancient berserker - yet his hair ornaments and the war paint adorning his face revealed his origins.
The man, tomahawk in one hand and spear in the other, was unmistakably Native American. And on his bare chest, a tattoo of a bat with wings spread flapped.
“Byte Gogo, of the Underworld Demon Clan.” The giant growled deep in his throat.
“But I don't like my name. My name is the name of the Banished One.”
“What?” Daiga shoved Sykes beside the rubble.
The demon also took a step forward. “Baitgogo... means ‘the one who hides away’.”
“That's an unhealthily depressing name.”
“I was branded, raped women, committed murders, and was banished from my tribe. I settled in the caves of Carlsbad. Darkness is my lair.”
“Daiga-san,” Sykes called from behind.
“Carlsbad is a massive cave in North America. A veritable bat's nest.”
“Huh. So your only friends are bats, then?” When Daiga asked, the demon clenched his tomahawk with a grinding sound.
"No. I have Lord Bolman. The Führer trusts me. He even chose me as your elimination agent. I want to live up to that trust."
“So we're the token of his gratitude? What a nuisance.”
Zett sighed, but Daiga shifted into combat stance.
“You were the one who tried to steal Lorraine by ship, too.”
“Not steal. Reclaim.” Gogo raised his hand overhead.
“My legacy cursed gate is the Carlsbad Bat. No one passes through me!” The giant Byte suddenly let out a deafening roar - simultaneously, a swarm of bats took flight.
They became a flying black tsunami, crashing down upon Daiga and Zett.
“Think you can pull the same trick again?!” Daiga unleashed Blood Souls from his hands and feet - they became a white light, Byakko’s Fist, covering his limbs completely.
The swarm that rushed in was instantly charred to ash the moment it touched the light.
Even so, the minions of the demon pressed forward without flinching.
“Don't waste time on trash! Fight more efficiently!” The bats closing in on Zett were instantly engulfed by flash grenades. Screaming shrilly, hundreds of them turned to charcoal. Suddenly, a gaping opening appeared before Zett.
Zett had already locked his chakram onto Baitgogo. “I know you're weak to light! Next time we fight, don't let them exploit your weakness first!”
But Baitogogo braced itself, expressionless. In an instant, it blew between Zett and the demon. It sliced Zett's skin, spurting his blood.

“Sandstorm!” Thrown off balance by the yellow whirlwind, Zett scrambled backward.
Daiga noticed it too and dodged the incoming attack.
“What the hell? Where did that come from...!”
It had blown through the gap, carrying the outdoor wind with it.
Driven by a clear intent, it blew away the luminous gel Zett had released.
The artificial light was extinguished, and the surroundings plunged back into darkness.
Byte Gogo took a slow step forward. “The sandstorm hides the light and makes us stronger.” The moment he grinned, his back bulged.
Black wings burst forth from within, tearing through muscle with a crackling sound.
As teeth grew with a grinding noise, the horde stirred to life once more.
Baitogogo, commanding that swarm, was truly the King of Bats.
“We are three in one, helping each other.” Daiga immediately followed.
The sandstorm was likely Captain Marseille - it was precisely because of that aid that Byte Gogo could fight even in daylight. A better combination than the demons Daiga previously fought.
But Zett seemed rather pleased by that fact. “Fine. All the better. Makes for a worthy foe.” He spun the chakram between his fingers once more.
“This is the first demon I'll defeat. The stronger they are, the more recognition I'll earn.”
Zett leapt over the rubble, aiming straight for Byte Gogo - even if he had some plan, it seemed reckless to Daiga. “Zett, don't panic.”
“Don't be ridiculous. I'm not panicking.” Zett hurled chakrams from both hands.
Sure enough, they must have been laced with luminous gel, for the surroundings brightened once more, and Zett, having removed his sunglasses, had regained his vision. “If darkness is your dwelling place, then light is what grants me power.”
Zett's eyes transformed into snake eyes.
“There are countless ways to counter darkness!” A petrifying beam shot from Zett's eyes.
But Baitgogo flapped its wings and swiftly dodged it.
“I won't let you escape!” His gaze tracked Baitgogo as he leapt from debris to debris - the swarming bats too turned to stone and fell to the ground.
Yet the swarm protected Baitgogo, maneuvering to surround Zett.
Finally, countless bats clung to Zett's face. “Damn it...!”
“Zett!”
Without needing to be peeled off, the bats meeting his gaze turned to stone.
But even then, other bats clung to Zett's entire body.
Sharp fangs pierced Zett's clothes, sinking deep into his flesh.
Daiga stiffened, trying to break free.
The bats, empowered by darkness, surged forward like a raging torrent once more.
Moreover, the bats aided by darkness moved at a different speed than before.
They dodged Daiga's strike, shrugged off Byakko's fist, and sank their fangs into his skin.
He tore them off hastily. Leapt back. Retreated. Still, he couldn't escape.
In the meantime, Zett became covered in a mass of bats.
Even petrified bats clung to his face, nearly choking off his breath.
“You were the one who showed weakness first.”
Gazing down at Zett, the demon Byte Gogo flashed his long fangs.

“Blind him, and it's over. Such a simple man.” The demon horde raised its tomahawk with leisurely ease. "The heads of fallen foes, offered to the spirits. Such is the custom of the Hokam warriors. You, man with the eyes of a venomous snake. Become a sacrifice for my soul, and return to the land of our ancestors."
The gurgling breath sounds were undoubtedly his tribe's language.
Daiga steeled himself, summoning the Suzaku Blade onto his right arm.
Simultaneously, he released a blade from his left hand and swung it wide.
In sync, he unleashed the Blood Soul from the depths of his being.
The energy to slay the demons burst forth, tearing through the darkness as a shockwave - thousands of bats, swallowed by crimson light, vanished in a single strike.
The flash of Blood Soul energy blew away even the bats that had dodged the direct hit with its shockwave.
“The prey is mine, Baitogogo!”
Daiga charged at Baitogogo, both blades gripped in his hands.
But it flashed with light and vanished in an instant.
Where did it go? The moment Daiga came to a sudden halt, a chill ran down his spine.
If he dodged, a tomahawk would pass mere inches above his head.
Several strands of jet-black and golden hair were sliced away as Daiga regained his footing. The demon, Baitogogo, had somehow appeared directly behind Daiga.
“You who bear the blood of the Hououji!” The demon swung the tomahawk down toward Daiga's skull once more. Even in the darkness, its aim was unerringly precise. Instinctively, Daiga crossed his blades to block the strike.
Daiga and Baitogogo pushed against each other's blades with every ounce of strength.
“My mission is to take your blood. That is how we will win.”
“Not on my watch. No thanks to forced blood donation!”
A new metallic clang. Sparks flew. Daiga pushed the tomahawk back momentarily and leapt vertically upward. He flew over Baitogogo's head, taking position behind the demon, but the instant he landed, Baitogogo's toes flew toward Daiga's eyes.
The demon's legs bent backward at impossible angles, joints seemingly ignored.
“What kind of body do you have, you bastard!” It was the bats' abnormally flexible joints at work - but Daiga dodged the kick with astonishing reflexes.
The demon swiveled around and thrust its spear this time - it aimed precisely for Daiga's vital points, reading his movements perfectly.
Throat, heart, liver, groin. The spearhead attacked vital points one after another.
“I can see you. You cannot see me.”
This is the first time Daiga’s movements have been read so thoroughly.
And once again, a swarm of bats gathered around them.
At last, Daiga was driven back against the wall by Baitogogo.
“There's no escape now.” Spreading its wings, Baitogogo smiled.
“I'll drink every drop of your phoenix blood” His eyes, dripping with bloodlust, gleamed.

The Prime Minister's Office was enveloped in frustration and terror.
“That sandstorm is the root of all this.”
The Chairman of the Joint Staff pointed at the three-dimensional battle map.

“It's weakened since it appeared last night, but it could still damage Tokyo. If that happens, our nation will lose its capital.”
“But we have no countermeasures!” The minister gasped, his voice strained.
“Our only hope is Daiga?”
“Exactly. The one who can neutralize the sandstorm is inside.”
The Prime Minister's tone hardened.
“If he's unharmed, he must be working tirelessly within. But...”
All eyes turned to the Prime Minister.
“If he is dead, we must implement the capital evacuation plan.”
The Prime Minister quietly surveyed the round table.
“This is the plan based on Directive B. Simultaneous evacuation of residents from Tokyo, southern Saitama, and western Chiba. His Majesty will relocate to Kyoto, and we will command from Saitama New City.”
“Isn't New City too close? What about Takasaki or Utsunomiya?”
“The government retreating too far back is also problematic. That would require evacuating all of Tokyo and the three surrounding prefectures.”
Even as the ministers stiffened, the Prime Minister continued.
“The issue is how to achieve a safe evacuation.”
“We should evacuate the residents of Yokohama City first. That should be the priority.”
“Hold on. Communication lines are only 30% restored. There are limits to relaying orders.”
“If we could at least confirm the major cities' status... Can you contact him?”
Silence fell again at his name.
But then, the door to the Prime Minister's Office conference room opened quietly.
“Everything depends on my grandson, then?”
Even the Prime Minister rose from his seat at the raspy voice.
“Hououji-sensei...” Hououji Muyori entered the conference room quietly, leaning on his cane. The seasoned politicians all shrunk back before the massive figure in traditional Japanese attire.
This old man was the one who had handled inexplicable incidents in the shadows of postwar Japanese politics - a legendary figure who wielded the power of the Houoji-style martial arts to crush conspiracies both within and without.
He appeared only in Japan's crises, rumored to be a supernatural being.
That was precisely why the cabinet now understood the gravity of the situation.
“Hold off on the evacuation orders for a while longer. Hououji Daiga will resolve the situation shortly.”
“But Muyori-san...”
“He's alive. If Daiga were dead, the demon horde would surely show new movements.”
The rogue plopped down into the offered chair. “But the sandstorm still hasn't cleared, disrupting communications and rescue efforts, right? As long as the demon horde is rampaging, we must assume Daiga is still alive.”
“With all due respect, Muyori-san, why don't you go rescue him yourself?”
The Foreign Minister pleaded in a desperate voice.
“You, of all people, could surely defeat the demon horde...”

“But what if something happens? Both me and Daiga might end up dead, you know?”
The rogue chuckled softly.
“If that happens, the Phoenix Clan will be wiped out. The bloodline capable of defeating the demon horde will die out. That's why I can't go to help. Even if my grandson dies, I alone must survive.”
As he spoke, the rogue's fingers dug into the round table.
The thick oak tabletop was scraped away with a grinding sound.
In the rogue's eyes, resignation and fury flickered. “What a pitiful story. An old man who survives while letting his grandson die...”
The Prime Minister fell silent, able only to bear the old man's thoughts.

“There's no escape now.” Byte Gogo closed the distance on Daiga, who had his back to the wall. Tens of thousands of bats swarmed around them.
“If you must blame someone, blame the eyes of that useless poisonous snake.”
Zett, the one blamed, was already a blackened mass, swarming with bats.
Daiga thought, if only he could move...
“Sykes!” The man who should have been hidden in the rubble had somehow crept close to Zett. Sykes extended his shirt-wrapped arm toward Zett.
He pushed through the swarming bats and grabbed something.
“Ah, got it!” A flash grenade.
He pulled the pin by imitation and hurled a flash grenade.
It rolled at Byte Gogo's feet, exploding in a blinding flash. “Guh!”
Byte Gogo flinched involuntarily, and the bats bathed in light scattered wildly.
It was enough of an opening for Daiga to leap forward.
“Thanks, Sykes!” Daiga dashed straight ahead, swinging his right blade through the air.
It shattered the swarm of bats, cleaving through the encircling net.
Simultaneously, he gripped his left blade in reverse, slicing through Baitogogo's side as they passed. The demonic creature sprayed iridescent bodily fluid from the wound, its black wings flapping wildly. “Gaaah!”
Daiga charged straight to Sykes' side.
Enraged bats were already swarming over Sykes' body.
With the bizarre swarm burrowing into his clothes, Sykes screamed.
“D-Daiga-san, help me!”
“You yourself got into that trouble, you idiot!”
Daiga extinguished his left blade and swiftly enveloped it in a white flash.
Byakko’s Fist tore apart the bats swarming Sykes - Daiga drove the bats away and helped Sykes to his feet. “You okay? You saved me, you know.”
"...D-does this mean you trust me now?" Panting heavily, Sykes asked.
“I figured it'd take a bit of recklessness like this to earn your trust...”
“Trust? Hell, I'd say you've earned my confidence.”
Daiga retracted the Suzaku Blade and nodded firmly.
“Zett would say the same if he saw what you did.”
Then Daiga rushed over to Zett, who lay collapsed on the ground.

Thanks to Sykes, the bats were scattered, but Zett's face was deathly pale, drained of all color.
“No time to sleep, Zett.” Saying that, Daiga gripped Zett's hand and channeled the power within his body into him.
Daiga's Blood Soul surged through Zett's body as healing energy - within seconds of receiving the healing technique, Zett's eyes snapped open.
“Daiga, I...”
“You're fighting the demon horde, aren't you? Get up already.”
Daiga conjured the Suzaku Blade from his arm with a flick.
“Or else I'll eat you myself. Is that what you want?” Zett slowly sat up.
Before his eyes, the demon member Byte Gogo knelt in agony.
Zett's eyes widened in surprise at the rainbow-colored blood dripping from him.
“Why aren't you finishing it off? This isn't the time to be helping me.”
Zett stood up, eyeing Daiga suspiciously. “If you do, you can go save Miss Lorraine.”
“Lorraine wouldn't wait for someone like me who abandoned you.”
Daiga said, his gaze fixed on the demon.
"Lorraine isn't that kind of girl. She'd scold me if I abandoned her."
“Daiga...”
“Besides, you saved Lorraine. I've repaid that debt now.” Zett took a deep breath in silence. Then he regained his usual sly smile.
“I'll make you owe me again soon. This time, I'll make it a long-term debt.”
Daiga and Zett stood shoulder to shoulder amidst the rubble.
And finally, the demon bared its fangs at the two.
“If you'd finished me off, you could have won.” Byte Gogo's lips trembled.
“But you saved your comrade. Too soft.”
Daiga gripped the Suzaku Blade in both hands.
Byte Gogo had completely read his movements. What to do about that?
Just as he tried to think, Sykes whispered from behind.
“If he's a bat, he should be emitting ultrasonic waves to locate his target.”
Watching Byte Gogo warily, he said. “I can't imagine he's tracking enemies with those eyeballs. Probably auditory... Could we emit interference noise or use steam to block the ultrasonic waves?”
“I see, so he's got biological sonar, huh?” As Daiga expressed his admiration, Zett let out a smile. “Come to think of it, I forgot you were a biologist.”
“W-well, sort of...”
“You should thank him, Zett. He's the one who saved you.” Daiga closed the distance with a sharp step.
“There's a Japanese proverb that says three heads are better than one.”
“But I'll go alone. I owe him for draining my blood.”
As soon as Zett spoke, he released a chakram at his feet.
It exploded with a tremendous roar, spreading a purple smoke screen.
“Guh!” Byte Gogo lost sight of Zet hidden in the smoke.
No, he lost track of Zet hidden by the explosion's sound.
“Just as I thought!” Daiga was certain Sykes's guess was correct.

The smoke must also be blocking the ultrasonic waves.
Baitgogo recoiled, his disgust plain - but hot on its heels, a new chakram burst from the smoke - this one was the standard type, with a blade edge.
It closed on Baitgogo at breakneck speed, severing his wing at the root.
The giant lost his balance midair and crashed into the pile of rubble.
“You won't be flying anymore.” Zett stepped out from the smoke screen and advanced toward the demon horde. He hooked the returned rotary cutting ring onto his fingertip. “So it was you who exposed your weakness after all, Baitogogo.”
The demon pushed aside the wall materials with a clatter and revealed its upper body.
“Don't you dare say my name.” Byte Gogo said, fluid dripping from his temple.
“I kill anyone who calls my name!”
“Go ahead – you’re welcome to try.”
“Not now. We'll settle this later.” The demon turned its eyeball towards Daiga.
“You think you've found my weakness? But I'm not just a bat.”
“What did you say?”
“Bats couldn't pull off something like this.” In that instant, an invisible wave spread from Byte Gogo - it warped space, swallowing Zett and enveloping Daiga.
Then, an echoing sound reverberated through their eardrums, threatening to burst them.
“This... uses echolocation...!” Sykes covered his ears against the sonic wave.
With a pained smile, the demonic swarm vanished silently.
Not a single bat remained of the countless that had swarmed moments before.
Only the lingering echoes of ultrasonic waves spread through the air.
“Damn... Zett, Sykes, you okay?”
“That was brutal. It pierced my eardrums and shook my brain.”
Zett shook his head, and Daiga agreed. “We let him slip through our fingers. I got complacent too.”
“Don't forget, Daiga. That thing is my prey.” Zett emphasized it, almost insistently.
“We've got its weakness now. We'll take it down for sure. After this, we should find some garlic and a cross somewhere. That sort of creature has always been weak to those things.”
“No time for that. We're moving deeper.” Daiga glanced at his wristwatch.
“Lorraine's beacon is still active. She's close.”
Zett and Sykes scrambled to keep pace as Daiga broke into a run.

But the demon horde had bought themselves ample time.
Warm steam enveloped the surroundings.
Overcome by unbearable drowsiness, Lorraine's head dropped.
In that instant, the girl's face plunged into the bath.
“Ah, I...?”
Waking up, Lorraine looked down at herself.
A cedar-lined bath, filled to the brim with hot water.
The girl submerged up to her shoulders was, naturally, completely naked.
But she felt no shame. This was the familiar bath of the Hououji household.
“Thank goodness... it was just a dream.”

Lorraine couldn’t remember what she saw, but it was definitely a nightmare - when she try to recall what kind of dream it was, strangely vivid fragments surfaced.
A sandstorm blanketing the sky. Yokohama engulfed in flames. Daiga's furious shouts.
But it was all just a dream, she thought, since she’s in her bathtub at home now.
Lorraine stretched and exhaled in relief.
Yet inside her body, her heart still pounded with terror.
To wash away the remnants, Lorraine stepped out of the tub.
She stood under the shower, letting the water run through her long hair.
Was she tired? She couldn't even remember when she'd fallen asleep.
She couldn't recall if she'd shampooed, so she decided to wash her hair just in case.
Then she noticed an unexpected mistake. “Oh no, this is Daiga's shampoo!”
She never made mistakes like this normally.
Lorraine stared at her palm, exasperated with her sleepy self.
The shampoo smelled like Daiga's hair after his bath.
Suddenly, it felt precious to her. She gently brought it close to her face.
The deep scent made Lorraine close her eyes involuntarily.

It was the scent that had always been by her side. It made her feel naturally at ease.
Lorraine hesitated for just a moment.
But immediately, she spread Daiga's shampoo across both hands.
“…|
She worked Daiga's scent into her own hair, slowly lathering it up.
The boy's scent rose from her blonde hair. As she rinsed under the shower, the foam flowed over Lorraine's body, and Daiga's scent overflowed from her entire being.
It felt as if she were enveloped in Daiga's fragrance. At that moment...
Lorraine turned off the shower. Still covered in Daiga's foam, she stood frozen in place, gazing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror.
Lorraine faced her reflection with an anxious expression.
Then, the Lorraine in the mirror let out a sinister smile.
“Do you think I'm a strange woman?”
At that question, Lorraine stiffened involuntarily.
But the reflection in the mirror shook her head.
“It's okay. I am you. I know everything about you. You didn't want to wash away his scent. That's what you thought, right?”
Feeling her thoughts read, Lorraine peered into the mirror. “You... who are you?”
“I'm you. And I came to confirm your feelings.”
Her other self asked from within the mirror. “What did you feel, wrapped in his scent?”
“Wh-what do you mean?”
“Don't play dumb. You felt like he was holding you, didn't you?”
Lorraine clenched her fists.
“That's why you stopped washing it off. You wanted to stay wrapped in his scent. But you're not a weird woman. If you like him, it's only natural.”
Facing her other self's teasing smile, Lorraine pressed her lips together.
"...I like him. And I’ve felt this way for a very long time."
“I know that too. Ever since you were a child, right? But you see, what I want to know is, do you like him as an adult woman?”
The self in the mirror held a lascivious light in her eyes.
“Have you ever... wanted to be held by him?”
Blood rushed to Lorraine's face. Worse still, a hot sensation welled up from within her body. Her naked skin flushed pink, and Lorraine began trembling where she stood.
“Th-that's... no...”
“So, what would you do if he proposed to you? Refuse? Hate him? Or... accept?”
Unable to answer, Lorraine could only tremble.
Seeing this, the girl in the mirror smirked.
“Well, that's fine. Some things are hard to put into words. But I need to be sure. Of your feelings.”
At that moment, someone grabbed Lorraine's shoulders.
Strong fingers. Lorraine turned and gasped in surprise.
“Daiga!” Daiga was there, somehow.
His scarred chest was right before her eyes. He was naked too.
The moment she realized this, shame made Lorraine lower her gaze.

“Why are you here...” Before she could finish, Daiga's arms wrapped around her back, then her waist. He pulled her forcefully close, pressing a rough kiss upon her lips.
Daiga's tongue pushed its way between Lorraine's.
“Mmm...!” Kissing. The realization made her embarrassment surge all at once.
She felt Daiga's naked body with her entire being. His physique had matured into that of an adult without her noticing. Loving each other as adults. That thought was terrifying beyond measure.
Yet, despite her tangled emotions, Lorraine accepted Daiga. Lost in the first act, she immersed herself completely. She couldn't believe it herself.
After deepening the kiss for a while, her embarrassment finally pushed Daiga away.
“No, please... What if someone sees us...?” But Daiga simply pressed his naked body against hers. Overwhelmed by his weight, Lorraine tried to scream.
But she didn't fall in the bathroom—she fell onto a soft bed.
In an instant, the scene had completely changed.
“What...”
The familiar room. A study desk and a man's shirt strewn about.
The place where the two had collapsed was unmistakably Daiga's own room.
But even though the room had changed, the two remained naked.
“Lorraine.” Daiga called out to her for the first time.
“I like you.” Put into words, it was an utterly ordinary confession.
Yet those words pierced Lorraine's body. Hearing it said face-to-face for the first time. She never imagined it could feel this good. “Dai-chan, I like you too.”
Lorraine naturally wrapped her arms around Daiga's back.
“I like you too. And I’ve liked you for a long time.”
As if to convey her feelings, this time Lorraine kissed him.
Then she pressed her flat chest tightly against Daiga's. Their heartbeats overlapped. Daiga moved his kiss to that chest. Embarrassed, she held Daiga tightly against her chest. “Dai-chan, I love you... I love you so much...”
Even when the moment came, Lorraine didn't resist.
More than the pain, the joy of becoming one with Daiga welled up inside her.
In Daiga's arms, she became a woman. They confirmed that joy by embracing each other. But with each of Daiga’s movements, an unexpected sound escaped Lorraine's lips. A shameful cry, one she had never uttered before.
She gripped the sheets, afraid someone might hear.
Yet as the bed creaked, Lorraine's consciousness went completely blank.
It didn't matter if they heard. More than that, she didn't want to let go of Daiga.
She wanted to stay like this forever. Once separated, she felt she could never return.
“Lorraine... Lorraine...” At the name whispered near her ear, Lorraine twisted.
Somehow, Daiga's voice had begun sounding closer.

“Where are you, Lorraine!” Guided by her beacon, Daiga advanced down the hallway.
It didn't take long to reach the center of the first floor.
But when I saw the scene spread out before me, my feet stopped of their own accord.
“This is...!” Even Zett, who had caught up, could only manage a clichéd gasp.

The theater, drenched in yellow pus, emitted a nauseating stench.
It was undoubtedly the ritual space of the demon horde.
But faster than he could comprehend, Daiga's gaze had already locked onto her figure.
“Lorraine!” The girl floated on the stage. Enveloped in black foam, she swayed precariously. All the theater's spotlights illuminated the foam, their light too black.
Within the foam, Lorraine kept twisting her body and moving her lips.
“Who are you talking to...?” Daiga was also startled by Lorraine's expression.
Her face was filled with a peace he'd never seen before.
Her ecstatic smile made Daiga's spine shiver.
Lorraine's sleeping face looked unnaturally mature.
“It's me, Lorraine!” Daiga soared onto the stage, gripping the Suzaku Blade backwards.
He swept the black foam aside with the blade's tip, causing it to vibrate as if in agony.
After taking the blow, the spotlight vanished, and the foam shattered.
From within, the girl's body floated gently down onto the stage.
Daiga slapped the cheek of the girl he'd lifted into his arms.
A faint smile still lingered on her face.
When Daiga sent his blood soul into her, Lorraine finally regained consciousness.
“...Dai-chan...” Lorraine slowly opened her eyelids.
Her eyes were dazed, as if she'd been dreaming.
Only now did she notice Daiga's presence. “No... Is it really you, Dai-chan?”
“What are you talking about? Were you dreaming about me or something?” When Daiga said this, Lorraine's cheeks flushed red.
The girl pressed her palm to her forehead, trying to calm the strange flushing. “Maybe... I don't remember... But I might have really been dreaming about you, Dai-chan.”
“After going through something like this, you can still dream?” Slightly exasperated, Daiga finally let out a sigh of relief. “But I'm glad I made it in time. I was worried, you know.”
“…I must have fainted. I remember collapsing...” Lorraine tried to pull her memories back - but even after trying to do so for a bit, her gaze remained unfocused.
“...I can't remember what happened. But... I'm sorry for making you worry.”
“It's okay, don't worry about it.” Daiga pulled Lorraine's slender body close to him.
The girl's body trembled violently. Lorraine looked up at Daiga's face fearfully.
“Daiga... Your smell… It's your usual shampoo, right?”
“Huh? Well, yes, but... Why are you talking about it a time like this?”
Daiga frowned at the girl's expression. Something had happened to her. It was just a hunch, but he felt it - perhaps Dr. Grant, who had been with her, knew something.
Daiga shifted his gaze to the theater's audience seats.
In the center, Dr. Grant was also unconscious - shaken awake by Zett and Sykes, the doctor finally opened his eyes. “Where is this... What happened to me and Ms. Lorraine...”
“Doctor, I'm so glad you're safe!” Sykes was overjoyed, but the doctor's memory seemed vague.
Daiga helped Lorraine and walked over to the group. “This is definitely the area controlled by a Heavenly Demon. They lured Lorraine here nicely.”

Daiga looked at the foreign letters covering the wall.
“But strangely, I don't sense any killing intent. Where’s the Heavenly Demon?”
“Perhaps it’s the one piloting the Messerschmitt outside.”
Daiga pondered Zett's words. “Maybe. It's possible the ritual space isn't complete yet. The Messerschmitt and Byte Gogo might have been buying time.”
Even as he said this, Daiga began to have doubts.
Where exactly was the Heavenly Demon preparing the ritual space?
It was also puzzling that they had left Lorraine in a place where she could be easily taken back.
“Dai-chan, I'm really sorry.” Daiga's thoughts were interrupted by the girl's voice.
“I was just so worried about Mr. Sykes' injury...”
A little exasperated, Daiga finally breathed a sigh of relief.
“I get it. That's just like you.” Daiga stroked Lorraine's hair as she looked down.
“I’ll tell you though, he can take care of himself.” Daiga turned his gaze toward him.
Sykes approached, looking apologetic. "Miss Lorraine, I'm sorry. You were in danger because of me…”
“It's fine - I did of my own volition.”
“No, I'm also at fault for not stopping you. I share the responsibility.” As the doctor joined them and the three apologized to each other, Daiga's mobile video communicator rang.
“.....Daiga.....What's going on! Contact me.....I told you!”
“I didn't have time for that,” Daiga replied to the intermittent 3D image.
“But I got Lorraine out. The Doctor and Sykes are safe too. If the VTOL can fly, send it to pick us up.”
“You make it sound so easy…” Reiko's tense expression appeared on the screen.
“The sandstorm is weakening... VTOL aircraft can fly now. But... that Messerschmitt is still flying. I don't think we can outmaneuver it...”
“We were attacked too... but it's just a regular propeller plane, isn't it?”
Daiga thought for a moment, then told Reiko. “Understood. The problem is the Messerschmitt. I'll take care of that. You guys wait for the right moment and send out the rescue aircraft.”
"Your location... I can monitor it. Team Asuka is standing by in the rescue aircraft. We can go anytime as soon as the chance arises..."
Daiga said, “Thanks for your help,” and cut the communication.
“What do you think you’re doing, Daiga?”
“What do you mean?”
“You said you'd take care of the demon outside.” Zett pointed at the windows with dissatisfaction. “If you're going to shoot that thing down, I want to join in.”
“You ate one earlier. That should be enough for you. Go back to the ship for now.”
“I agree that Miss Lorraine needs protection - but I haven't had my fill of fighting the demon horde yet.” Zett took a deep breath. “Let me have the Messerschmitt too.”
“Fine by me. If you can fly, of course.” Daiga replied with a fearless smile, and Zett froze. “
“What? You mean...?”

“There's no other way to fight him.” Daiga cracked his knuckles.
“If you can't fly, you're useless.” Even Zett had no reply.

Yokohama was still covered in a sandstorm.
Although it had weakened somewhat, visibility and communications had not been restored - in fact, the sand and dust piled up on the ground was now ankle-deep.
“Then wish Lorraine luck for me.”
”Yes, sir. Good luck, Zett!” With her encouragement, Zett burst out of the plaza.
He kicked up sand and gravel as he ran, sprinting toward his bike.
Above his head, the sound of propellers rapidly approached.
“Found me already, huh?! My good looks are just too conspicuous!”
Messerschmitt attacked Zett from behind - machine gun fire blocked his path.
Lorraine, watching from inside the plaza, cried out involuntarily.
“Mr. Zett, it's too dangerous outside!”
“He knows that!” Dr. Grant and Sykes, shouting, clenched their fists tightly.
Under their worried gaze, Zett zigzagged his way forward.
“I won't die from such an anachronistic weapon!”
He dived onto the road, performed a handstand forward roll, and twisted his body.
Even if he couldn't match the Great Fang, Zett's athletic ability was also superhuman.
With agile movements, Zett reached his Lord Rocket V in the blink of an eye. “The problem starts here!” Straddling the seat, Zett started the monster machine.
The sound was reassuring, but the engine was immediately unstable. A moment of weakness. “An engine that's tough on Earth is tough on its rider too!”
Messerschmitt rose once, then headed back to its firing position.
It circled toward Zett, rapidly approaching at low altitude.
“Hurry up, I can't hold out another ten seconds!” Who was he talking to? His voice grew rough. “I'm not your attack dog! Are you going to let me die!?”
The Messerschmitt moved directly in front of Zett.
Its wings swayed slightly. It was taking aim.
Then, just as the cannons and machine guns roared simultaneously...
With a deafening roar, the glass windows of the Landmark Tower shattered.
While Zett bought time, Daiga raced up to the upper floors - he sliced through the thick glass with his blade and leaped into the air. “Leave the rest to me, Zett.”
Daiga dug his blade into the ground and leaped from over ten stories up.
His landing spot was precisely where the Messerschmitt was.
“I'll take care of this one!” The fighter, noticing him, tried to escape by climbing out - however, Seiryu’s wings slowed Daiga's descent, allowing him to close in on the Messerschmitt.
Daiga spotted the pilot turning around in the cockpit and tried to thrust the Suzaku Blade into the fighter's windshield - his target was the pilot behind the glass, but the Messerschmitt also performed an ascending reversal.
Intense G-forces acted on Daiga's body, causing the blade to slip.
In the end, the crimson blade pierced only the rear of the cockpit.

Supported by the blade, Daiga was carried away over the sea, still connected to the Messerschmitt.

“Clinging to a fighter plane, huh? With grip like that, you could travel the world.”

Zett finally started his Lord Rocket V and headed for the plaza. Lorraine, who was waiting, immediately handed him a mobile video communicator.

“Zett, what about Dai?”

“I think he’s doing just fine.” With the engine still running, Zett looked at the three-dimensional image. “Send me Miss Sakimizu. I can take the three of them back from here on my bike.”

“Understood. It's already... taking off...” Despite the usual communication interference, Reiko replied forcefully. “I'll join them while Daiga buys time...”

“I'm the one who bought the time, you know. I'll never be his opening act again.”

Zett ended the call and stared at Lorraine. “But you don't seem to mind much. Daiga's plan is practically suicide.”

“Dai-chan wouldn't say he couldn't do something he couldn't do.” Lorraine sat on the passenger seat. “I know, it’s strange, but I'm not too worried. He'll definitely come back.”

“I see. I wish I could earn that kind of trust from you. Well then, let's go!”

When he grabbed the throttle, Grant and Sykes panicked.

“Wait a minute, Zett. What about us?”

“Just get on!”

“W-wait, four people on one bike?”

“You bet. It's the only way to escape from here.” Zett said with a carefree expression.

“Get on the left and right sides, one at a time. Grab the seat and stand on the muffler with one foot. This baby can handle it - it's military spec, so it won't break even with some extra weight.”

“You’re making us do some acrobatic stunts here!”

“Ayup - but compared to whatever Daiga’s doing, it's nothing.”

With the screams of the two scientists aboard, the Road Rocket V took off.

Daiga was still in the middle of his stunt - he clung to the top of the Messerschmitt, resisting the fierce gravity. “Maybe I was pushing it a bit too far!”

If push came to shove, he could use Seiryu’s wings to descend to the ground.

But if the Daiga broke free, this machine would switch it’s focus and attack Lorraine and the others on the ground - he had to stay clinging on and somehow shoot it down.

Daiga conjured Byakko’sw fist around his left hand and smashed through the seam of the outer panel. He tore off the aluminum plate with brute force, sending countless rivets and pieces of the outer shell flying into the air. “This isn’t working!”

However, the Messerschmitt also began a spiral dive to increase the gravitational force.

As it plunged downward, the sea surface spun around above Daiga's head, causing his blood to rush to his head. Just as his vision turned red, the aircraft finally reversed course and climbed, skimming the surface of the sea. This time, the blood rushed to his feet, and Daiga's vision suddenly went dark.

“I can't control my Blood Soul at this speed!” Even Daiga couldn't keep up with this sudden turn - but in the corner of his vision, a white silhouette crossed his field of view.

It was a vertical takeoff and landing aircraft with rotary engine pods on both ends of its main wings. The aircraft, called the 27 Wyvern, a hybrid between a helicopter and a propeller plane, slowly descended toward Honmachi Street.

At the landing site, someone was waving their hand around a large motorcycle.

The wind from the rotor blades was definitely blowing back blonde hair.

Knowing that Lorraine had been protected, Daiga's fighting spirit was revived.

“Looks like I did buy them some time!”

However, Messerschmitt had also spotted the V-27 – the pilot turned the nose of his aircraft and descended rapidly toward the landing site. He intended to destroy it before the V-27 could take off.

“I won't let you!” Daiga conjured a Suzaku Blade in his left hand and threw it with all his might. The crimson blade flew into the nose of the aircraft and slammed into the propeller. The propeller exploded in a shower of sparks upon impact.

Fire spewed from the engine, and the aircraft climbed as if to avoid stalling. “Now you won't be able to fly freely anymore!”

Sure enough, the Messerschmitt staggered away from the V-27. “

“What the hell?!”

It passed the Landmark Tower and headed for the Minato Mirai Bridge - no matter how wide and unoccupied it was, did it intend to land on the bridge?

Just as Daiga thought that, the aircraft suddenly vanished.

The Messerschmitt disappeared without a trace, and Daiga was thrown into the air.

He frantically conjured Seiryu’s wings to slow his fall.

Daiga rolled as he landed on the bridge covered in dust.

“Damn it, how could you just drop me like that!”

But Daiga's senses had already detected a killing intent nearby.

A sandstorm filled his line of sight. A figure stood in the dust.

A person clad in an old-fashioned pilot suit – their face was hidden by goggles and a yellow scarf.

“Captain Hans Joachim Marseille.” Daiga called out to the pilot. “That must be your name, ace of aces from the North African campaign. Only you would pull off something fancy like using the number 14 plane.” Then he closed the distance.

“But why did you become a host for a demon? Why did you lend your power to them? Were you a believer in Nazism too? You, who were even called the Star of Africa...”

The pilot calmly stepped over the sandstorm. Their figure radiated confidence.

Then he suddenly stopped and spoke in an unexpected voice.

“I have no interest in Nazism.” A woman's voice, resonant with beauty. As Daiga stared in shock, she smiled. “I have unfinished business. That grudge drew the Demon Horde to my sandy grave.”

“You... don't tell me...” Daiga, about to speak, lowered his face against the intensifying sandstorm.

Sand swirled and gathered around the pilot like a vortex. Within that whirlwind, the sand witches who had attacked the ship danced wildly. “Now that I've become an Adaptive Body, the Star of Africa has been reborn.”

The pilot removed her goggles and pulled off her scarf.

Her wavy golden hair flowed down to her waist. She smiled directly at Daiga.

“Indeed, I am Captain Hans Joachim Marseille of the German Air Force.”

It was a powerful smile, reminiscent of a Germanic pagan goddess.

V-27 hurriedly returned to the deck of the Critias - the ship was still buffeted by strong winds, but Hadley's skillful piloting ensured a safe landing.

Lorraine was the first to step onto the deck, and she immediately pointed into the distance. “What's that?” Looking north, they could see the Minato Mirai district spread out before them. Beyond that, a sand tornado rose skyward, writhing and swaying. Zett also rushed out of the aircraft and looked at the scene.

“That's the direction Daiga and Messerschmitt headed. It's probably the legacy cursed gate of the demon pilot.” Zett spoke so as not to be drowned out by the sound of the 27 rotors. “It seems they've finished their acrobatics and started fighting. But they're doing it in quite a spectacular way.”

“It's not just for show, look!” Dr. Grant also stood on the deck and pointed at the sky.

The tornado gradually increased in thickness, and its violent movements became more intense. “The demon piloting the Messerschmitt must be controlling this sandstorm.” Grant said, biting his lip.

“It seems the tornado has restrained Daiga-kun. He won't be able to move like that.”

“Then Dai-chan...”

"He'll suffer, yes. But that is his mission. We cannot allow them to capture you. Right now, all we can do is watch from here." Zett moved at the doctor's words.

“Are you sure? I can fight demons too.”

“Indeed, but in the current situation, it's impossible. Right now, you cannot leave this place.” Grant shrugged his shoulders. “Someone needs to protect Miss Lorraine. Are you abandoning that responsibility?”

Zett said nothing and turned to look at V27.

Inside the ship, Sykes was being carried out on a stretcher.

Major Hadley, who was carrying him, called out to Lorraine.

“Sykes has been shot in the leg - and it looks like he's lost a lot of blood. I'm sorry to ask, but could you help the crew?”

“Understood. I'll go.” Lorraine accompanied the stretcher into the ship.

Then Zett steeled himself and rushed to his superior.

“Major Hadley, I request permission for independent action!”

“You intend to go help Daiga?” Hadley looked up and gazed at the distant tornado.

“Your mission is to guard Lorraine. Leave the demon to Daiga.”

“There are at least two of those demons. Do you think the enemy would spread their forces?” Zett remained firm. “If I were them, I'd throw everything at the isolated Daiga, then go after Miss Lorraine.”

“I see. But the likelihood of simultaneous attacks aimed at surprise and disruption is far higher.” Hadley watched the tornado gradually swell.

"Pin one down while the other goes for Lorraine.

That's precisely why I sent you back to the ship. And I too..." But Zett refused to budge.

His eyes weren't serpentine, yet they emitted a cold light.

“My true mission isn't her escort. You should know that.”

“That doesn't mean you have a reason to abandon her now.” Hadley was exasperated by his new subordinate's stubbornness. “Independent action refused, but be ready to provide backup immediately if I order it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get Lord Rocket V on the ship. You've used up quite a few chakrams - don't forget to restock from the reserves.” Having given his orders, Hadley also dashed back inside the ship.

Zett returned the salute, then turned his gaze to the swelling tornado.

“Now then... I wonder just how many demons will appear to fight Daiga?”

Zett narrowed both eyes beneath his sunglasses. “And when will we seize Miss Lorraine?” Just as he thought this, doubt flashed through Zett's mind.

“Please rest for a while.” Lorraine finished treating Sykes and smiled.
The girl changed out of her pus-stained clothes and into a medical team's white coat.
“Your leg will probably still hurt, but your anemia symptoms will improve quickly.”
“Thank you. But I... I guess I came to the wrong place after all.”
“Huh?”
On the infirmary bed, Sykes let out a big sigh. “When Dr. Grant asked me to take on a top-secret mission... I turned him down once. He didn't tell me what the research was about beforehand, but he kept saying he needed me.”
“But you're very talented, Mr. Sykes.”
“Not at all. There were lots of people at university who were better than me. That's why it's still a mystery to me. Why did the doctor ask me specifically...?”
Lorraine looked down gently at the bed.
“But I heard from Dai-chan. Mr. Sykes, you saved the two of them when they were in danger, right? I thought that was amazing.”
“No, please, that was just luck. I can’t fight like Daiga-kun.”
“But you did fight in your own way, right?”
"That doesn't count as fighting. If I were even one-tenth as strong as Daiga-kun, I could hold my head high..." Saying that much, Sykes laughed.
“What is it?”
“Ah, but even one-tenth of Daiga-kun's strength is too much. Comparing myself to him is presumptuous, isn't it?”
But Lorraine didn't return the smile. “Dai-chan used to be such a crybaby. He'd have constant nightmares... He wasn't always this strong.”
This was news to Sykes - but Lorraine continued, her words woven quietly.
“But I was even more of a crybaby. I had no dad or mom, I was lonely, and I cried all the time. When he saw me, Dai-chan told me, ‘Don't cry.’After that, Dai-chan got stronger. He never cried again, and kept up with Grandpa's training. I don't really understand it, but I'm sure it was hard.”
Sykes looked up into the girl's blue eyes. “...All for you?”
“Yes.” Lorraine smiled without a trace of embarrassment. “People can become strong when they think they're doing it for someone else. You fought to help Daichan too, didn't you? You two are the same.”
“I only thought about myself” Sykes remembered what had happened a few hours earlier.
“Daiga-kun and Zett-kun didn't trust me. They suspected me of being a spy... So I just wanted to clear up their suspicions, that’s all.”
“So, you did it to earn Daiga’s trust, right?” The blonde girl clasped her hands together happily. “I think you're strong, Mr. Sykes. That's why Dr. Grant invited you to join the Ziegen Institute.”
“Lorraine...”
“Why did you accept that invitation the second time?”
"Well... it's because I respect Dr. Grant. He didn't reveal the details of his research,

but his eyes were serious when he asked me to join. That's why I accepted."
“Weren't you scared when you heard it was research on the Demon Horde?”
“Well, I still find it creepy. But thanks to that, I learned that there are people suffering. That's why I was able to continue my research, but I guess I lost some confidence.”
Then Lorraine smiled warmly. “I think that's what the Doctor liked about you.”
“Wh-what do you mean by ‘that’?”
“You have strength of heart, Mr. Sykes.” The girl continued cheerfully. “Dai-chan also said you weren't weak. He noticed it too. You definitely have the courage to fight the horde.”
Sykes blushed under her direct gaze. Blood that should have been lacking rushed to his head, and he pulled up his towel blanket. “P-Please don't flatter me. I'm just a researcher, after all.”
“But I'm sure you, Mr. Sykes...” Just as Lorraine was about to say something, the door to the infirmary suddenly opened.
“Well, you’re partially correct – you did make me worried.”
“Doctor...”
Dr. Grant entered and smiled wearily. “I never imagined you'd be taken to the lair of the demons. That was far too dangerous a field trip.”
“I-I'm sorry.
“No need to apologize. How are you feeling? I won't let you say you feel unwell with Ms. Lorraine looking after you.” Lorraine smiled and washed the medical instruments.
Seeing this, Dr. Grant stroked his chin. “Well now, Ms. Lorraine. It seems Sykes' treatment is finished, so now it's your turn. Show me that tattoo. Let's begin the examination.”
“Oh, now?” Lorraine tilted her head slightly.
“Yes. Show me.”
“But Daichan hasn't returned yet, and outside of the ship...”
“A sandstorm? Don't worry about it. We have the time while Daiga is fighting.”
At those words, Sykes also sat up. “But Doctor, the equipment isn't ready yet.”
“Really now?”
“And if the demons attack now, there's no way we can do the examination...”
Dr. Grant nodded with a sly smile. “True, true. But...” Lorraine felt something strange in the doctor's voice. It was a deceitful note, hiding his true emotions.
The girl stiffened and turned around. “You...!”
But Lorraine's gaze fell on Sykes' trembling face - on the bed, Sykes was shaking violently. Looking closer, she saw a knife deeply embedded in his lower abdomen.
And the one pushing the knife in was none other than Dr. Grant. “Dr. Grant... You...!”
“Indeed, I don’t recall you being one of us.” Dr. Grant said with a smile. He pushed the tip further in and twisted the knife. “Even the notion of trash like you associating with us is insulting.” Then he bowed to Lorraine. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Otto Skorzeny of the Heavenly Demon Clan.”
At that moment, the girl was enveloped in black foam.
The dream began again.

【Chapter 4】

Sandstorm dust enveloped the Minato Mirai Bridge. Standing in the eye of the storm, Daiga fixed Captain Marseille with a piercing stare. “Why?”

He demanded, closing the distance. “Why did you hide the fact that you were a woman? Who the hell are you?”

“Originally, I was nothing more than an adventurous female pilot.” Recalling the past, Marseille continued. “I was quite skilled, too. But the German Air Force wouldn't acknowledge female pilots - our Führer said German women should stay home and protect their families.”

“…”

"But the 1940 Battle of Britain changed my fate. The supposedly invincible Luftwaffe suffered a crushing defeat in its failed invasion of the British mainland. Many excellent pilots were lost, and training replacements took time."

“So that's when your chance came – they enlisted your help despite you being a woman?”

“Exactly.” Marseille flashed a combative smile. “But we were forbidden to use female names. The German military couldn't bear to be reviled for continuing the war by resorting to women's hands. The Führer's will is absolute.”

“So Hans Joachim Marseille is just an alias?”

“Indeed. They even gave me a deliberately non-Germanic name. Though now… I don’t even remember my real name.” The roaring tornado steadily grew in power. Marseille toyed with a strand of her long blonde hair.

"It’s because my life as an ace pilot of the German army were my golden days. Flying in my plane, shooting down enemy fighters... Each time a kill mark was etched, my homeland of Germany rejoiced."

“You were certainly a hero. But in the photos...”

“Yes, all the photos in the papers were of a man. A stand-in. Not me.”

So that was the reason. Daigaclosed the distance further.

“Do you wish to reveal your true self and win new glory?”

“Indeed - but that's merely the second reason I became a demon.” Marseille stretched her red lips into a smirk. “Do you know Captain Erich Hartmann?”

“Of course. He was the Luftwaffe's greatest ace, wasn't he?” Daiga knew the answer as a matter of course.

Marseille nodded with satisfaction, twirling a strand of her blonde hair around her finger. “Impressive. You really are half-German. Captain Hartmann does hold the record for most kills. His final tally was 352 aircraft, compared to my 158.”

“Do you envy him?”

“Yes. To the point that it makes my blood boil.” For the first time, Marseille flashed a glint of murderous intent. “When I died in an accident, Hartmann was still a virgin pilot who hadn't shot down a single plane. Then in the blink of an eye, he overtook me and snatched the title of strongest.”

“What a pathetic grudge.”

"There were plenty of others who surpassed me too. Barkhorn, Larr, Kittel... My records were broken one after another, and the name Marseille was buried in the desert."

Around the pilot, sand witches danced. Marseille fixed her gaze on Daiga.
“If I hadn't died in that accident, the title of top ace of the German Air Force would have been mine. So, to prove that, I rose from the desert.”
“So you plan to shoot down more planes?”
“What, those no-name pilots? No matter how many I shoot down, they hold no value. What I desire is the title of having killed you, Daiga Hououji.”
And the demon horde spread its arms wide.
“Your head belongs to me alone. I won't hand it over to anyone else.”
The Sandstorm Witches had surrounded Daiga without him noticing.
As they swarmed in from all sides, Daiga summoned crimson blades in both hands.
“Why don't you just shut up and die!”
Daiga spun like a whirlwind, slicing through the attacking witches one after another.
It was as if Daiga himself had become a whirlwind wielding blades.
Every witch touched by the phoenix blades exploded into dust.
Having crushed over twenty enemies, Daiga landed on the ground.
“These lot couldn't lay a finger on me.”
“The name of my Legacy Curse Gate is Kylene's Sandstorm.” Marseille stretched out both hands once more. “North Africa, where I carved my glory, is covered in endless sand. No matter how many you slash, the sand witches will rise again.”
True to her words, fresh enemies poured forth from the whirlwind, streaking through the air towards Daiga. “I wonder just how much Blood Soul you have in you… before you run out.”
Daiga sliced through enemies blocking his path and mowed down those closing in from behind - it was indeed an overwhelming number, seemingly endless, yet in a way, their attacks were monotonous.
Daiga began to sense something puzzling about this assault - why persist with such a simple, flat-out push? Moreover, Marseille herself wasn't joining the attack.
Even if waiting for Daiga to exhaust himself, this was strange - as this thought struck him, Daiga shifted his stance amidst the chaos. “Oh, I see it now!”
He broke through the encircling net, attempting to burst out of the whirlwind.
But the sandstorm suddenly intensified, lashing at his skin.
“Seems you've finally realized. You're pinned down.” Marseille laughed loudly.
“I won't let you reach the ship. That is my mission.”
“I see. A coordinated play with Byte Gogo.” Turning back, Daiga glared at the Ace.
“You plan to have him attack the Kritias and seize Lorraine.”
“Bingo. That's why you're in the way.”
“You think you've trapped me, but I see right through your scheme.” Daiga licked the blood flowing from his arm. “I've got my trump card left on the ship too. Zett will take care of Byte Gogo.”
“I’m not sure about that… Did you forget? We demons travel in groups of three.” Marseille shook her lustrous golden hair. “What do you think will happen if our Heavenly Demon joins the fray?”
Daiga's breathing became ragged and chaotic.

“What I want is the title of having killed you!”
As Marseille spread her arms wide, the Sandstorm Witch emerged one after another from the whirlwind!

Zett ran down the deck of the Critias.
Hadley suddenly heard the sound of his heavy footsteps. “What's wrong, Zett...?”
“Where is Miss Lorraine!” Zett pulled his superior officer aside in the corridor. His expression was not his usual calm self.
“No, not just her! Where is Dr. Grant!”
“What's the rush? They're both in the medical bay. Just ahead...”
The Major pointed down the corridor, and Zett started to turn the corner... then froze.
Sensing something in Zett's reaction, Hadley also looked down the corridor. “No...!”
The Major started to say, but his words caught in his throat.
In front of the medical room, two marines assigned to guard duty lay collapsed on top of each other. They had died without firing their automatic rifles.
The soldiers' eyeballs had been gouged out with a sharp blade.
Then, a blood-stained hand crawled out from inside the medical room.
As the dying body appeared in the hallway, inch by inch...
“Sykes!” Major Hadley pulled Sykes up, who was calling for help.
However, the assistant, stabbed in the abdomen, was covered in blood and could only breathe weakly. “...Major, Ms. Lorraine...” Having said that much, Sykes vomited dark blood. Hadley pushed him against the wall and drew a pistol from his chest.
As Zett reached for a chakram, Dr. Grant's voice came from inside the room.

“You're a little late, Major Hadley. Seems the Siegengang has become sloppy.”
There was a strange distortion in the paleontologist's voice.
With a rich, cold laugh, the owner of the voice appeared. “How come you didn’t foresee this happening?” Dr. Grant's white coat was drenched in Sykes' blood.
The face looking down happily at his blood-soaked body was not human.
However, what surprised Z and Hadley most was where the man was standing.
Beyond the door should have been a small medical room. But there was no trace of its original form. One step forward, and it had become a passageway running through the center of the audience seats.
Hundreds of seats lined the left and right sides, surrounding a semicircular stage - it was the strange theater Zett had seen at Landmark Tower.
Dr. Grant stood on the yellow-covered stage, looking as if he were a god.
And above his head, black bubbles floated once again. “
“Lorraine...”
Inside the black bubble was Lorraine, unconscious. Her expression was strangely peaceful, and she even smiled occasionally. It was exactly the same scene Zett had seen at the Landmark.
“...I knew this would happen.” Zett muttered in frustration.
“Byte Gogo, and the Messerschmitt... Demonic groups are always a trio – there must have been another enemy. But I never imagined it would be disguised as Dr. Grant...”
“Did I exceed your expectations? If so, then the operation was a success.” Dr. Grant narrowed his eyes. “Zett Hannibal... I hear you gave my Armed Immortal Guard a rough time in South America. I'll repay that favor right here.”
Zett grimaced at being addressed. “And just who the hell are you?”
“A man with a natural talent for deceiving people, including tactics bordering on identity fraud. Richard Hadley, British Army Major. We've deceived each other quite a bit, haven't we?” Then Grant's voice changed to a deep, masculine tone.
Is that his real voice? Just as Zett wondered, Grant's face suddenly began to contort.
His face warped and deformed, instantly transforming into that of a middle-aged Japanese man. But in the next instant, it changed again, this time into the face of a young high school girl. Then an elderly woman, an elementary school student, a foreign woman... The transformations continued without end.
Zett frowned at the opponent who displayed hundreds, thousands of faces.
“Being able to freely transform into anything isn't something to brag about.”
“Not ‘freely’, boy. I can only transform into people I've eaten.”
“What? Then Dr. Grant too...!” The ever-changing face emitted a cruel voice.
“I did so while Lorraine was unconscious in the Landmark Tower. It was also my doing that there was no one around that building. I was fed enough life to construct the ritual space.”
“You bastard!”
“The name of my Legacy Curse Gate is The Phantom of the Opera.” Showing ten thousand faces, the demonic group said. “Unlike the famous musical, it's the

Vienna Opera House, though. But it was a performance worthy of such a historic stage, wasn't it?" And finally, the transformation stopped.

The last face to appear was that of a blond man in his twenties. The word arrogant fit him well. Most striking was the long scar running across his left cheek.

Yet that alone was enough for Hadley to recognize his true identity.

"You... you can't be...!"

"Otto Skorzeny of the Heavenly Demon Clan. Former SS Major General."

The man declared confidently, his attire instantly shifting to the black uniform of the Waffen-SS. Flaunting his ceremonial cloak, the demonic figure pulled his military cap low over his eyes. "By order of Führer Martin Bormann of the Fourth Reich of Germany, I have come to claim Miss Lorraine. Anyone who interferes will be cut down." The moment he spoke, a slender rapier materialized in the demon's hand.

The gesture of holding it before his face was that of a dandy who relished a duel.

"Major General Otto Skorzeny, huh?!" Reiko, who had already sensed the disturbance in the medical bay, shouted at the surveillance monitor.

Captain Ramsey, still connected to the control shell, stiffened. "I've heard the name. A former German soldier?"

"He's not just famous. He's legendary."

The captain immediately called up information on the surrounding monitors.

Countless black-and-white photographs appeared on the holographic display.

"Born in Vienna, 1908. Commander of the Waffen-SS Destruction Squadron, a special unit composed of elite troops from the Waffen-SS and Parachute Division?"

The captain instantly grasped the vast amount of data. "When Italian Prime Minister Mussolini fell from power, he led a small force in a surprise raid on the Gran Sasso mountain villa where Mussolini was imprisoned, successfully rescuing him. Later, he plotted to assassinate Yugoslav Partisan leader Tito and Allied Supreme Commander Eisenhower... He was called Europe's most dangerous man...

"But his most famous feat was during Operation Defend the Rhine."

Reiko murmured, relying on her own memory. "His men disguised themselves as American soldiers, rode in captured US military vehicles, and carried out rear-area sabotage. Posing as fake American troops, they infiltrated enemy lines and killed one after another, mistaking them for comrades."

"That's a violation of the Geneva Convention," Ramsey declared bluntly. "Disguising themselves as enemy soldiers to kill enemy soldiers... In the wars of Europe at that time, soldiers wore their own uniforms and fought openly, clearly identifying themselves."

"That's precisely why Skorzeny's disruption worked. He's a man who'll stop at nothing to win, even if it means breaking the rules. But for him to become one of the Demon Horde too..." Reiko turned her gaze back to the surveillance monitor.

On the screen, Zett and Hadley faced off against the legendary man.

"Skorzeny survived brutal wars and even escaped the Nuremberg Trials. Did he become a host body after his death in 1975?"

“Either way, that man is formidable enemy.” Captain Ramsey began analyzing the footage. “With that aristocratic appearance fused to a Demon Horde, he'd want to flaunt his power.”

“Skorzeny's facial scars aren't battle wounds. He got them during thirteen duels in his student days.”

“If that's the case, his swordsmanship must be...”

“I’m not sure if Zett and Hadley can win...” Reiko groaned and looked up at the sky. “Whether Daiga can return to the ship—that's what this battle hinges on.”

“We'll deploy every marine aboard. Even if it's just buying time, we'll do everything possible.” But then, one of the monitors flashed red.

“Countless flying objects approaching from the Landmark Tower. Appears they're breaching the ship.” Ramsey reported calmly, switching the main monitor to the external feed.

It showed tens of thousands of something surging forward like a cloud of mist, what looked like a dark cloud was a swarm of bats baring their fangs.

“Launch interceptor micromachine missiles.” Captain Ramsey's command unleashed a barrage of missiles. The warheads shot vertically upward, immediately exploding and scattering smoke-like particles - but the dark mass was actually a swarm of countless robots. The interceptor micromachines burst into the air, blocking the advancing swarm's path. Black tidal waves collided mid-air.

“Engagement initiated.”

Reiko listened silently to the captain's calm voice.

Micromachines plunged into the bats' bodies, exploding like bullets.

The cutting-edge barrage, reaching numerical scale, swiftly shot down the swarm.

Yet the minions of the demon horde overpowered the fierce counterattack and closed in on the Critias. Captain Ramsey issued orders one after another.

“Soldiers, fire at will individually. Heavy weapons authorized on Second Deck and above.” Marines in the corridors unleashed a hail of fire from their 5.56mm M18 automatic rifles. Over a hundred troops laid down a hail of bullets against the swarm that had breached the micromachines - but the raging horde could not be stopped by gunfire alone. In an instant, the soldiers were swallowed by the bat-like hordes.

“Retreat! Fall back inside the ship!”

Faced with ferocity that tore through even bulletproof vests, the Marines retreated.

Then, one by one, bulkheads sealed off the passageways.

Captain Ramsey's will transformed the corridors into sealed cubes in an instant.

The trapped bats began thrashing, trying to break through the bulkheads.

But within the sealed compartments, Captain Ramsey unleashed a barrage of diverse attacks.

“Cube 7A, deploy asphyxiating gas, Level C. Cube 8D, carnivorous bacteria solution spray. Cube 3N, reduce temperature inside bulkhead to minus eighty.”

The anti-magic swarm technology prepared by the Ziegen Agency was unleashed within the countless bulkheads. It caused the bats to writhe in agony, devoured them, and froze them to death in an instant.

Furthermore, the captain analyzed vast amounts of combat data and simultaneously transmitted it to Ziegen operatives worldwide, relaying the battle's progress.

“Unlike the Daiga, we mortals must rely on science.” Ramsey fought within the control shell. “Even if this ship sinks, we’ve already obtained data on the demons.”

But finally, the demon Byte Gogo descended onto the deck - the winged Native American bared his fangs. “I'll sink this ship.” Baitgogo strode boldly into the ship's interior - his primitive armament consisted of a tomahawk in his right hand and a spear in his left.

Marines blocking the passageway took cover and lined up their automatic rifles.

“Freeze rounds! Fire!” At the commander's shout, countless flames engulfed Baitgogo.

With each freezing projectile that struck, white steam billowed from the demon horde's bodies. Yet not a single drop of their iridescent bodily fluid leaked out, and the wounds regenerated before their eyes.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” Byte Gogo roared. He swung his tomahawk down, severing a marine's head. The thrusting spearhead pierced through the bulletproof vest, slicing the man like butter. “Cube N, isolate the demon!”

The captain attempted to block Baitogogo's path - but the demon's speed outpaced the bulkhead's movement.

The tomahawk sliced through the thick wall, preventing the cube from forming.

Baitogogo pushed deeper, chasing the fleeing soldiers. The passageway became a veritable river of blood and mountains of corpses.

“Seems Baitgogo has arrived too.” Skorzeny declared, rapier at the ready. “His bats will chew this ship to smithereens.”

“That suits me fine. Taking down two demons at once is ideal.” Zett hooked a rotating cutting ring onto his fingertip - his face even held a hint of delight at the prospect of prey. Especially if it's a Heavenly Demon. That’s gonna bring some glory. I'll show them I'm the foremost expert in demon extermination.” Zett glanced briefly behind him.

“That's the plan, Major Hadley. I'd appreciate it if you didn't interfere with my fight. Not that I think you could defeat a Heavenly Demon anyway.”

“Don't overestimate your abilities, Zett.” Covering Sykes with his back, the Major also raised his submachine gun. “I'll show you what a true human can do. I'll provide cover.”

“I... I too...” Suddenly, Sykes spoke. "I too... will fight... Lend me a weapon... ..."

“Sykes, don't push yourself!” Yet even mortally wounded, he crawled forward into the ritual space. “Because... I was with her... I couldn't protect Ms. Lorraine... So I too...”

The girl still drifted within the black foam. Glancing up at her, Zett shook his head.

“Just leave this to me. After all, you're nothing but a scientist.”

Then he took a step closer to Skorzeny. “I'd appreciate it if you didn't interfere with my moment in the spotlight.”

“Really? To me it seems like your final curtain call.”

Zett fell for the taunt. He hurled the chakrams from his fingertips, slamming them head-on into the demon, but Skorzeny wildly swung his rapier in all directions.

The chakrams were easily deflected, embedding itself in the wall and shattering into four precise fragments. The demon horde's blade had instantly sliced the ring crosswise.
“Quite an interesting toy you got there.” Zett leapt toward the laughing Skorzeny.
As he removed his sunglasses, his snake eyes revealed themselves. A petrifying beam was fired at the demon horde's feet. First, immobilize them. That was the plan...
“Dodge, Zett!” At Hadley's shout, the man with snake eyes twisted his body.
Skorzeny swung his rapier, catching the petrifying beam with its blade.
But that wasn't all. The gleaming blade tip reflected the beam, firing it back at Zett.
Landing, Zett licked his body. The petrifying beam grazed just above his head.
As the flash struck the pus-covered wall, the Heavenly Demon Gang shook his index finger sideways.
“That's your specialty, isn't it? You shouldn't dodge.”
“Guh...!”

“Is that all you've got? Then it's my turn.” Skorzeny readied his rapier. “Shall I teach you the good old Viennese style of dueling?”

The demon's movements were reminiscent of a ballet dance - he closed in on Zett, thrusting the rapier's point forward. It was like a storm of steel. He slashed precisely at the neck, chest, and side.
Zett spun away, but Otto anticipated that movement. In an instant, blood spattered from Zett's body. Both were too close for Hadley behind them to provide covering fire.
“It's a pity there's no music.” Skorzeny stepped back, offering a smile. “Wouldn't it be nice to fight to a Viennese waltz?” His landing was as graceful as that of a European gentleman. Zett, breathing heavily, realized he was being toyed with.
But why did he retreat? If he'd pressed the attack for just a few more seconds, he could have killed him. The answer lay in Sykes, crawling on the floor.
“Zett, he’s just trying to buy time!”
Zett and Hadley locked onto Lorraine above them - a black mist-like substance began swirling around the girl, dancing as if possessed, filling the air with black bubbles.
Realizing what was happening, Zett shouted at the celestial demon horde.
“So, this your ritual? What do you intend to do to Lorraine?”
“Nothing yet. Just... letting her dream.”
“Dream?”
“Yes, a dream. A pleasant one.” Skorzeny's gaze was fixed on the bubbles. “A dream where a bud becomes a flower. And when the flower blooms, the gate opens.”
Zett and Hadley felt a chill and stared intently at the girl. And Sykes, too, noticed the new change. “No... no...!”
Within the black mist of the black bubbles, Lorraine's pale skin flashed briefly.
That tattoo writhed across her slender arms - yet even from this distance, the tattoo was clearly visible. The bewitching portrait of a woman absorbed the black mist and gradually grew larger.
“When the tattoo takes over the girl, the flower will open.” Skorzeny wiped the blood from his rapier. Until then, shall we dance a little longer in my opera house?”
Lorraine smiled. Happily. Her lips murmured someone's name softly. “Dai-chan...”

Lorraine clung to the warmth in the bed.
Daiga's sleeping, naked body was damp with both their sweat.
Using his strong arm as a pillow, Lorraine continued to doze.
The surroundings were dim. She couldn't tell if it was day or night.
How long they had made love was unclear - but now, such things didn't matter at all.
Simply touching Daiga's skin, feeling his breath. That alone was happiness - but suddenly, her own voice echoed from somewhere.
“...I've never seen anyone love like you do.”
Lorraine looked down at her left arm. The tattoo.
There, on her skin, that tattoo stood, wearing a lascivious smile.
“The feelings since childhood run deep, the bond formed will never be broken. But you know, your feelings are too strong. You accepted him. But what if he rejected you? If he loved another woman, what would you do then?”
Lorraine hesitated slightly. “Dai-chan would surely... no, if that happened, I would...”
“Oh? You'd step aside of your own accord? How very clichéd and virtuous of you.

Do you really think you could do that? Even though you love him so much?"
Lorraine bit her lip at the mocking tattoo. “I... I just want Daichan to be happy...”
“Then I'll show you just that. Daiga being happy with another woman. And how you feel watching it... That'll be something to see.” Lorraine felt a chill at the tattoo's smile.
The next instant, she heard someone calling again.
“Daiga!” A girlish voice, almost pleading. It sounded familiar.
Lorraine shot up from the bed and gasped in shock.
The place she'd thought was Daiga's room had somehow transformed into a seaside park.
Lying on the bed placed on the grass, Lorraine stared blankly around her.
Under the blue sky, flocks of seagulls passed overhead, and the Hikawamaru was visible nearby. “This place... Yamashita Park...”
People passing by enjoyed their holiday, seemingly unaware of Lorraine's presence.
From within that bustle, her voice reached her once more.
“Daiga, over here!” Lorraine finally spotted the source of the voice.
Waving toward them was a girl with short hair.
“Miki-chan...!” Ogawa Miki was calling out to Daiga with a dazzling smile.
Her excitement was unlike anything even her best friend Lorraine had ever seen.
Then, the man who had been sleeping beside Lorraine stirred. “Yeah... I'm coming.”
Daiga rushed over to Miki as she slipped out of bed. Clothes wrapped around her naked body, quickly restoring her usual appearance. Miki threw herself into the arms that had been Lorraine's pillow just moments before.
“You're late! Did you forget what today is?”
“It's your birthday, right? I know that perfectly well.”
“Well then, today you have to indulge all my whims, okay?” The two snuggled close together, laughing. Lorraine stared at them, dumbfounded.
“So first, lunch is at the Curry Museum. They have a summer vacation limited menu right now. Like watermelon curry, or red bean curry.”
“Yeah. If that's what you want to eat, that's fine with me.”
When Daiga nodded obediently, Miki threw her arms around his. “After lunch, let me pick out my birthday present at the shops in Kannai. There's this ring I've wanted forever.”
“Hey, I hope it's within my allowance budget.”
"Then we're going to Cosmo World, right? I wanna ride like three coasters. And get tons of stuffed animals from the crane games. Then when night falls, we ride the Ferris wheel. Okay, Daiga?”
That was the date Lorraine had dreamed of. But Daiga just laughed at Miki's words.
“Sure thing. Being a boyfriend is tough, huh?” A crack formed in Lorraine's heart.
Her emotions were in turmoil, and the scenery around her spun dizzyingly.
She saw Miki scoop her curry with a spoon and feed it to Daiga's mouth.
In Motomachi, Miki forcibly pulled Daiga's arm into an accessory shop.
Lorraine watched alone on her bed, even seeing them playing at the amusement park.
“...Dai-chan...” Even when she summoned her courage to call out, Daiga didn't respond.
On the pier at dusk, Daiga embraced Miki from behind, holding her close as if he would never let go. When Miki finally turned to face him, their lips met naturally.

On her finger, the gift for her sixteenth birthday sparkled.
“...This... This can't be real...” Lorraine tried to close her eyes.
But my body wouldn't budge an inch, unable to escape the bed.
“This is your creation... an illusion... Stop this already...!”
Then that voice came again, from my left arm. “No. Not yet. Look at him... Look at her. And tell me your true feelings.”
Hearing those words, Lorraine fought back desperately. “I won't be fooled... I won't believe this!”
The tattoo let out a piercing laugh - simultaneously, its form spread across Lorraine's entire left arm. Taking over from her shoulder to her wrist, the tattoo's thoughts grew stronger. “I'll tell you why you were chosen. It's because of the deep, powerful love you possess. That intense feeling of loving him... That's what I needed! Because only love that's too strong causes a massive collapse when lost – soon, jealousy and possessiveness should arise within you... Just a little bit is enough. Even the slightest bit gives me power! And the more you are consumed by me, the more your faith will crumble, and doubt will grow.”
The tattoo gradually spread across Lorraine's chest and neck.
But the girl herself could only writhe in agony upon the bed.
Her half-body taken by the tattoo, her white skin stained hideously.
“Hate him. And hate your best friend. Use that power to awaken me. Accept my tattoos, host body Lorraine Rosenberg. Become the Queen Demon! Open the gate to beyond!”
The tattoos laughed triumphantly across the girl's skin.
Lorraine could no longer even scream.

“Lorraine, she...” Reiko was speechless at the scene displayed on the main screen.
The surveillance feed from the medical room, now transformed into a ritual space, was still transmitting - within the black foam, Lorraine began to writhe in agony.
Moreover, the black gas enveloping the girl was being sucked into the tattoo before their eyes. Simultaneously, the tattooed woman rapidly increased in size, spreading across Lorraine's skin.
Reiko shouted through the microphone to the men who should have been there.
“Richard! Zett! Save her, please!” But the image suddenly became severely distorted.
Captain Ramsey in the control pod frowned. “No response from the medical bay surveillance monitor. The ritual space is gradually eroding the hull.”
That wasn't all. The demon, Baitgogo, had also breached the ship - to defeat the two demons and save Lorraine, she had no choice but to call him.
“Daiga, get back to the ship! Now!” Reiko pleaded into the mobile video communicator.
But static choked the call. Reiko's voice grew frantic.
“Can't you hear me, Daiga?! Lorraine is already...!”

“I'll tell you why you were chosen.”
The tattoo woman whispered seductively to Lorraine.

“...Back to the ship... Now...” Reiko's voice came in choppy bursts from the communicator strapped to her waist. “Can't you hear me? Lorraine is… already...”
Though muffled by the tornado, the transmission conveyed anguish.
Hearing that voice, Captain Marseille smiled quietly. “It seems it has begun... on that ship.” The demon horde gathered the sandstorm witches around her.
" Otto Skorzeny, Lord of the Heavenly Demon Clan. Disguised as that scientist, he boarded your ship. By now, the ritual should have begun."
Hearing of the conspiracy, Daiga's breathing became even more erratic.
Otto Skorzeny. Of course he knew that name. It was a name he had heard long ago, when he was a child - he never imagined that man would sacrifice Dr. Grant.
Mocking Daiga's astonishment, Marseille closed the distance between them.
“Our goal is to nurture Lorraine Rosenberg's tattoo. Even without taking it by force, once the tattoo takes over Lorraine, the gate will open of its own accord.”
Daiga quietly regulated his breathing. He thought only about what to do now.
“I'll cut you down. I won't waste any time.” Daiga voiced his decision. “After that, I'll return to the ship. That's all.”
“Simple and clear. But precisely because you won't resort to tricks, it's the best choice.” Impressed, Marseille folded her arms. “But can you do it?”
“...I'll show you.” Daiga crossed the crimson blades gripped in his left and right hands.
The witches, responding, waited for their chance to charge - yet Daiga took an action that defied the demon horde's expectations. Daiga exhaled sharply, releasing the refined Blood Soul from his back - it instantly turned into Seiryu’s wings, lifting Daiga's body into the air - but the blue light burst forth from his back far more intensely than usual. Moreover, true to the name of the Seiryu’s Wings, it formed a pair of powerful wings.
With those wings, Daiga literally flew into the air. He dove into the vortex of the tornado, repelling the blowing sand and gravel with his Blood Soul. Riding the rising sandstorm, Daiga soared into the sky in one go.
“A new technique, huh?” Looking up at Daiga, Marseille pursed her lips. “So you decided to save Lorraine first after all.”
Above the head of the ace pilot who said this, a presence slowly rose.
What appeared was a Messerschmitt Me 109E with its engines running.
The damage to Daiga had disappeared, and it was as good as new, and Captain Marseille was now in the cockpit. “Follow me, Witch of the Sands of Kyrene!” The Messerschmitt climbed steeply and pierced through the tornado at full speed - countless sand witches pursued it.
Flying over Yokohama, Daiga looked back at the aircraft approaching behind him.
“They're fast, as expected!” Daiga passed the Landmark Tower and lowered his altitude, he desperately tried to shake off the witches, but by the time the Critias came into view, the witches had caught up.
“Is this all you've got with your newly learned technique?”
He flew freely through the sky with his blue wings - it was a technique Daiga had just mastered, but he was not yet skilled at it, so his speed was slow and it consumed a

lot of energy. Finally, with the ship in sight, Daiga was overtaken by the Messerschmitt.

Did you think you could win in the air? Marseille's thoughts spoke directly to Daiga's heart. “I won't let you go to the ship. Not until everything is over, and I'll show you what happens if you leave me behind.”

Suddenly, the Messerschmitt flapped its wings up and down - taking that as their cue, the Sandstorm Witches flew off in all directions. Leading the way, the minions of the devil dove into the city of Yokohama. As they crashed into the ground at tremendous speed, they caused a tremendous explosion.

“You...!” Daiga's eyes, filled with rage, caught sight of the building collapsing from the impact. Directly below it were people waiting for rescue. Ambulances carrying the injured, but the collapsed building crushed them in an instant.

“Stop! Marseille, stop!” But Messerschmitt simply circled leisurely over Yokohama Harbor.

“Now, go. To Lorraine. It's fine to abandon the masses for just one person.”

The explosions continued, and the sound of buildings collapsing shook Daiga's eardrums.

Daiga gritted his teeth in agony and hovered in midair.

“Oh, what's wrong? Aren't you going to her?” The Messerschmitt flapped its wings as if to toy with him. “Do you have time to stand here? If you don't hurry, Lorraine's body will be taken over by the tattoo, and the city of Yokohama will be wiped out without a trace.” The propeller noise was overlaid with the ace pilot's laughter.

A cruel voice pierced Daiga’s eardrums.

Lorraine was still moaning in agony in the black foam - the tattoo continued spreading, staining the girl's skin black. Directly below, the battle between Zett and Skorzeny raged on, but even if he wanted to save Lorraine, Zett was merely being toyed with by the flashing rapier.

“You won’t win by just dodging my attacks, you know.” Skorzeny declared, sounding dissatisfied. “Or have you given up on saving her already?”

Indeed, Zett was completely helpless - his entire body was already carved and stained with copious blood. Skorzeny, on the other hand, was unscathed. The outcome was clear.

“Zett, go get Daiga.” Major Hadley raised his submachine gun. “You're a vital special combatant. We can't afford to lose you here. Join forces with Daiga and work together to reclaim Lorraine.”

But Zett snorted derisively at his superior. “Your concern is appreciated, but you’re no match for him!” Breathing heavily, he readied his chakram. “I'll dispose of him before Daiga arrives for your viewing pleasure. This one, I cannot yield.”

At Zett's words, the demon also gripped his rapier tighter. “Ah, but Zett Hannibal, I've grown quite bored with you.”

“Don’t worry. I got more in my arsenal than just chakrams.” Zett swept his supple arm around his waist - what he drew was a sword with a strangely curved blade. Pressing the button on the hilt again caused two more blades to extend and sprout from the blade.

Scorzeny chuckled smugly at its windmill-like form. “I've seen this before. I'm sure it was brought back from Tunisia by a soldier of the Afrika Korps...”
“Wartlas. A throwing knife used by the Jellid Salt Plains tribes.”
“You don't seriously think a mere sword can cut through a demon, do you?”
Before he could finish, Zett charged forward - wartlas in his right hand, he slashed at the horde's chest. Skorzeny leaned back slightly, evading the blow - but the bizarre blade traced an unexpected arc, slicing open the demon horde's chest.
Simultaneously, an electric shock surged from the Wartlas blade, convulsing Skorzeny.
“Pressure-sensitive... That blade is an electrode!” Sliding past the demon, who instinctively retreated, Zett leaped toward the wall.
His toes pierced the wall of the ritual space. Embedded in his boots were chakrams.
Driving the circular blades into the wall as footholds, Zett reached near the ceiling in an instant. His target lay ahead: the black bubble enveloping Lorraine.
“Is that what you were aiming for?” Skorzeny too leapt into the air, gripping his rapier.
Flipping his cloak, he blocked Zett's path and swung his sword.
The rapier and Wartlas clashed violently. Lightning flashed once more.
But overwhelmed by the superior strength of the demon, Zett scattered the rotating cutting rings. He landed on the floor, using the explosion to block Scorzeny.
However, the blast reached the black bubble, violently shaking Lorraine inside.
“Zett, don't take her with you!”
“Hardly words I'd expect from you, Major.” Zett landed on the floor, readying his Wartlas and the chakrams.
“Our mission is to defeat the demon horde. We have no choice but to thwart their schemes this way.” He aimed another explosive cut at Skorzeny in midair.
Even if the blast reached Lorraine, he threw it at point-blank range without hesitation.
Skorzeny dodged and responded to Zett's fighting style with a smile. “Your mindset differs from that of Daiga. He fights for this girl, but you fight for yourself.”
Leaping over the wind, the demon horde also returned to the floor. “But why do you wish to win at the cost of involving this girl?”
“Simply because I want to defeat you. That's all.” Zett faced Scorzeny with a defiant expression. “Because of these snake eyes, even my family shunned me. The only one who valued me was Colonel Dietrich. To repay him, I have no choice but to defeat the demon horde.” Zett transformed his eyes into snake eyes and leapt directly in front of the Heavenly Demon, his eyes locked straight onto Skorzeny.
But the Heavenly Demon Horde flung its cloak wide, concealing its form. “Your eyes only petrify living beings,” Skorzeny declared, seeing through the tactic. “Covered by the cloak, my flesh cannot be gazed upon.”
Yet Zett's fingers had already launched a spinning slash - it attacked Skorzeny's body from both sides - the cloak covering the demon horde was sliced to shreds in an instant, tearing through the Waffen-SS uniform.
“So that's what that cut was for!” Skorzeny lost his balance and fell onto the stage.
Zett did not miss that opening. “I've taken you down, Otto Skorzeny!” Once more, the petrifying beam pierced the demon's face. Just as he thought that, Major Hadley shouted.

“No, Zett!” Suddenly, a black wall rose between Zett and the demon horde - it was a swarm of bats that had flown in from the side. Countless flying creatures stuck to Zett's face, crushing his vision. Just like the last battle, Zett, unable to breathe, rolled onto the deck.

“Gah... guh...!”

“You should learn from your mistakes.” Suddenly, a giant's voice called out. “Falling for the same trick twice, huh?” Standing on the stage was the giant, the Underworld Demon, Byte Gogo. His entire body was drenched crimson with splattered blood.

Realizing it was his subordinates' blood, Hadley released a grenade from his waist.

But Byte Gogo leapt over the explosion and closed in on the Major. “This is the end for you too.” With terrifying strength, Byte Gogo thrust his spear forward.

“Gwaaaaah!” The tip pierced Hadley's right thigh, pinning him to the floor.

Sykes, who had been screaming, sat up. “M-Major Hadley!”

Byte Gogo glared at his trembling face. “You’re next.” His gaze conveyed this as Sykes retreated backward.

Bleeding from his abdomen, he slithered away. Eventually, he crawled out of the ritual space and fled. “Don't pursue him, Byte Gogo. That man isn't worth finishing off.”

“But he interfered with me once.” Byte Gogo growled, his throat rumbling. “Even a fluke is unforgivable. Please permit me to pursue him.”

But Skorzeny, rising to his feet, calmly shook his head. "No. Wait here for the gate to open. I doubt Hououji Daiga will come, but we must guard this ritual space. And that puny scientist? We can toy with him later." Skorzeny slowly sheathed his rapier at his waist. His black Waffen-SS uniform was torn diagonally, exposing his chest. There, too, was the flashy tattoo of a masked knight.

The tattooed face also looked down on the fallen Zett.

"You think you've already... think you've won?" Still clinging to the bat, Zett croaked.

But overhead, Lorraine's body was being swallowed by the tattoo.

It had already half-possessed the girl's skin.

The tattoo spoke to Lorraine with a stronger will. “You'll gradually begin to doubt what you believed in. Your feelings for him, your trust in your best friend…”

In agony, Lorraine clenched the sheets. The tattoo laughed as it invaded her pale skin.

“And you'll realize your own arrogance, believing you could speak such pretty words Hahaha... Soon I'll draw disgust and hatred from you - the emotions you spew forth are sweeter and richer than honey to me. Only you can bring about a collapse worthy of a queen. Now, show me... your filthy emotions.”

But Lorraine just shook her head desperately. "...Dai-chan... Miki... .!"

The tattoo shrank back on her skin.

“No more pretending. Squeeze out more emotion.”

The invasion paused, then began to stiffen painfully.

“Give me all of it. Your sweet honey. Even if you want to believe them, you can't resist being invaded by me like this.”

Lorraine jerked violently backward.

Her wide-open eyes reflected only darkness.

But the girl's consciousness grasped a completely different scene.
“What is that... A window? A well... Or a gate...” The tattoo slowly resumed its invasion.
"Ah, the gate is opening little by little... What lies beyond... I'm scared... Far, far away... I can see an island... A stone city... round... surrounded by canals... A great statue of a god... A palace... But I'm scared... Da-ichan! Dai-chan!"
At that name, the tattoo froze once more. “Impressive. You won't let me open it so easily. Sorry to the demons waiting in the ritual space, but taking over this girl won't be easy - but the 108 demons have longed for this moment for ages.”
The tattoo crossed its slender arms and formed an eerie sign with its fingertips.
“Break through, Lorraine Rosenberg. Accept it, Lorraine Rosenber. The gate to the beyond is carved into your body. All that remains is to open that gate.”
The otherworld spread before Lorraine's eyes once more. Vast, deep, and dark, threatening to swallow her whole. Facing it, the girl closed her eyes.
“Dai-chan... Goodbye.” The girl held back her tears. “We won't see each other for a while... because...” Finally, Lorraine prayed with all her might.
For the image of Daiga fighting. For the burning city of Yokohama.
Then, as if in prayer, she pressed her fingers together.
“Because... because Daichan...”
“Still calling him? It's about time you let go of your lingering attachment…”
“He won't come here...” At that moment, the tattoo stiffened.

Daiga focused his vision on the Critias.
A swarm of bats had gathered on the deck. It was only about a kilometer away - but if he stepped forward, the city of Yokohama would suffer further attacks. The roar of the Messerschmitt drowned out his inner conflict.
What are you going to do, Daiga Hououji? If you go now, you can still make it.
It's your chance to get Lorraine back. Is it really okay to just hand her over to them like this? But Daiga stared intently at the Critias from the air.
Lorraine was suffering on that ship.
But just imagining that scene, Daiga understood what he had to do.
“...I get it, Lorraine.” Daiga turned his back on the ship and faced Messerschmitt.
The fighting spirit shining in his eyes was refreshed. “Don't underestimate me. I won't hesitate.” Then, he manifested the Suzaku Blade in his right hand.
“I won't be able to see you for a while... forgive me.”
“What's with that pointless soliloquy?” Marseille circled the aircraft and asked. “Giving up already, you fool?”
But Daiga's eyes were filled with determination - even his body seemed to grow stronger in an instant, radiating a murderous aura like flames. “I'm staying here.”
Looking around at the commotion among the witches, Daiga continued. “I can't go to Lorraine.” It was the witches who were astonished.

“...Dai-chan won't come here.” From the bed, Lorraine stated clearly.
“Just take over me... Do as you wish.” Her resolute stance showed not a shred of hesitation.

The tattooed woman twisted her face in surprise. “Why don’t you despair, knowing he won't come? On the contrary... your trust in him has revived. No, your feelings for him have only grown stronger…” Suppressing her agony, the tattooed woman shrank back. Lorraine stared at her own defiled skin.

“...I thought about why Daichan wouldn't come.” Lorraine's expression remained unbroken. "Dai-chan is fighting desperately right now. He surely cares more about the many people in Yokohama than he does about me. That's the real Dai-chan."

Lorraine pointed at the lingering phantom. The figures of Daiga and Miki, huddled close, gradually faded. “I'm alone now. So I have no choice but to let you take over me.”

“Then why aren't you despairing!?”

“Because Daichan would never give up.” Lorraine smiled at the tattoo. “Even if I become the gate you speak of, he will definitely come to save me. I’m sure of it…”

Then the girl closed her eyes. "That's why I'm not afraid of what happens. Because Daichan will definitely come. Knowing that, I can go anywhere."

“Does Daiga think so too?” For the first time, the tattoo's thoughts faltered. It was reeling from the girl's strength. Lorraine looked down at the tattoo and answered softly.

“Our feelings are the same. Always have been, always will be...”

As if echoing the girl's words, the boy gripped his blade. “I'll let you have Lorraine for now. But mark my words, I will take her back.” Daiga declared to the Underworld Demon, Marseille. “No matter how long it takes, no matter how far apart we are, I will absolutely get her back. But in return, I'll crush you right now.”

“Are you going to lose her for one demon in front of you?” The circling fighter sent her thoughts. “You're a more unpredictable man than I thought. Think about it, you'll know which is more important.” The Sand Dust Witches all laughed in unison.

But Daiga stubbornly refused to change his mind. “There are things more important than cold, hard logic.” Gripping the Suzaku Blade, he aimed at the Messerschmitt. “Until now, I've only thought about saving Lorraine. I've only thought about how to drive the tattoo out of her body. But that's not enough. Even if I drive the tattoo out of Lorraine, as long as you demons exist, there will be no peaceful world. Even if Lorraine alone is safe, the world won't be saved!"

The devastated sight of Yokohama filled Daiga's vision.

Black smoke billowed upward. Fires spread from block to block. How many people were fleeing in panic, helping each other, continuing rescue efforts?

“…Lorraine would want to save that city too.” The hand gripping the Crimson Blade creaked. “For that, she would bear the burden alone. That's why I want to respond to her feelings. I refuse now. To save Yokohama.”

Daiga's hair fluttered in the sandstorm. Standing with wings on his back, he resembled an angel going into battle. The Messerschmitt also turned its nose toward Daiga.

“I see... So that's the power that cut down Lord Gentsu and the others.”

Marseille's voice trembled under the pressure.

Then the Messerschmitt suddenly increased its speed.

It flew over Daiga's head in one go. Its destination was downtown Yokohama.

Daiga responded by chasing after the Messerschmitt. “Are you trying to escape, Marseille?”

“Seeing your determination, I will do my best to hold you back!”

Leading the Sandstorm Witches, the fighter plane skimmed past the skyscrapers.

“I will keep you occupied, buying time for Lord Skorzeny! Even if you win this fight, as long as we open the gate, victory will be ours!” Marseille's thoughts were filled with a determination that matched Daiga's.

“It's laughable that you'd give Lorraine away. You don't understand what will happen to her - once the ritual is performed, she will no longer be the same. For you, everything will end. For us, everything will begin!” The Messerschmitt, flying low, fired at the road surface.

There were still people there, continuing to...

“Hey, what... what is that?!”

“Why is there a propeller plane?!”

People looking up at the sky were torn apart by the engine, flesh scattered across the street

“Marseille, you bitch!” Daiga put all his strength into his reverse-grip Crimson Blade and threw it like a spear, but Marseille made the aircraft rise sharply, evading the blow.

“Was it just big talk when you said you would crush me? There will be more victims if you don’t finish me off!” Then the Messerschmitt dove toward Chinatown.

When it approached a height low enough to crash, it pulled up and headed for Yamashita Park. That sudden flight maneuver unleashed a devastating shockwave across the ground. One of Chinatown's symbols, the bright red Chaoyang Gate, was blown to smithereens.

“Evacuate! Evacuateee!” The voices of Self-Defense Forces personnel conducting rescue operations reached Daiga's ears.

Beneath the rubble, the blood of countless victims flowed.

What did they think, witnessing the propeller fighter and the boy's pursuit?

Daiga had no time to ponder that.

“You bastard, those were human lives!”

“I see no value on them. These people, who grew complacent over the years… “Machine guns fired again. An ambulance was hit directly. It overturned and burst into flames. “Unlike me, who lived through war, they take peace for granted. Students clinging to meaningless lessons. Salaried workers swayed by petty cash. Drinking, shouting, resorting to empty threats of violence, incapable of doing anything by themselves. The lives of such people aren't worth sparing.”

More Sandstorm Witches struck one after another. They exploded, crushing those fleeing in panic. “From now on, it is the era of demons. Humans will lose their right to survive on Earth. I will teach you that fact the hard way.” Marseille continued, singing. “Slaughter is the dawn of a new era / Peace will never return.”

Marseille aimed at a section of Yamashita Park.

Below her were people fleeing in panic. But there was nowhere to run.

Messerschmitt twisted the aircraft and descended.

Daiga tried to catch up with the fighter, but witches swarmed around him.

“Get out of my way!” Again, he swung the Crimson Blade. He cut down the witches and pursued the fighter - but the Messerschmitt was already too far away for Daiga to catch up. All Daiga could do was scream. “Don't shoot, Marseille!”

The screams of the people were drowned out by the sound of the propellers.

Daiga felt despair welling up inside him. Then he heard another sound, different from the roar of the Messerschmitt. It was approaching rapidly, racing straight through the air.

“That's it!” Daiga instantly turned his eyes toward the urgent sound.

He thought it was a black tube flying through the air. But it had small wings.

Leaving a trail of smoke from its tail, it flew at a speed many times faster than the speed of sound. Its target was the Messerschmitt. It mercilessly pierced the center of the aircraft. With a huge explosion, the Nazi fighter was blown to pieces.

And finally, Daiga realized what the object was. “An anti-aircraft missile! Who? From where?” The power to shoot down a demon was not that of a normal weapon, but without confirming it, Daiga headed straight for the ship.

The missile had definitely been fired from the Critias.

“Who on earth...”

Then, sunlight poured down from the sky. The sandstorm Marseille had been manipulating finally dissipated. The August sun showed its face over Yokohama.

Its intense rays pierced the swarm of bats.

“Intruder life signs: Disappearing at 600 per second.”

Captain Ramsey captured the image of bats swarming inside the ship - their bodies, exposed to sunlight, turned to ash one by one. The mass death of his subordinates was also detected by the main Byte Gogo.

“Impossible! Marseille was taken down...!”

“Our oversight, though we deemed it impossible. But who could...”

At that moment, a man appeared at the entrance to the ritual space.

No, bleeding from his abdomen, the man had returned here.

Shouldered was a portable universal missile launcher.

But his current stamina likely couldn't bear its weight.

He had found some rope somewhere and tightly bound it around his body.

White smoke still rose from the launcher's muzzle.

He was the man who had slaughtered the demon horde Marseille.

“...Sykes...” Hadley, collapsed on the ground, noticed the man and his weapon.

“Dust-destruction warhead... blew apart the ritual space of the Celestial Demon Gents... I thought it would be effective against the Demon Horde... an enhanced prototype I had loaded. That thing...” Sykes didn't answer, aiming the launcher at the stage.

The Demons knew the power of the mixture of aluminum and chemicals.

Baitgogo, filled with malice, raised his tomahawk. “I told you I should have finished him off!” But Sykes' finger pulled the trigger, unleashing a single shot with a deafening roar. The recoil was so severe, however, that his aim was off, and the muzzle jerked upward. The single shot shattered the chandelier and slammed into the theater ceiling, exploding.

The resulting fire consumed the ritual space, spreading across the crumbling walls.
Even Scorzeny retreated in agony from the overwhelming heatwave. “To fail at the last moment!” Beyond the collapsing walls, blinding sunlight poured in.
Baitgogo's skin, exposed to the sun, began to char.
“GAAAAAAHHHHHH!” The giant's body, bathed in sunlight, began to burn.
Scratching at the melting flesh, Byte Gogo writhed in agony. “You... You of all people...!” As their master fell, the bats began to detach from Zett's body.
Zett sat up, his blurred vision locking onto Sykes. “...So you saved me again...”
Sykes smiled, his face covered in blood. Yet, from the wound where Skorzeny had stabbed him, blood flowed profusely. Even so, he looked up at the ceiling and said with a peaceful expression. “I'm glad... that Lorraine is safe...”
At those words, both Zett and Hadley looked up at the black bubble.
The bubble, which hadn't shattered even from the blast, was slowly fading away - and on the girl's skin, the tattoo was gradually shrinking.

Lorraine was on the beach as the sunset faded.
“I don't know where. I just walk barefoot along the shoreline. Right before me stood another version of myself.”
“This is the beginning of our battle. Mine and yours.”
The other me said that. "I'll let you go this time. But I will take over your body. I've finally found a suitable vessel. I have no intention of leaving. Besides, many of my followers desire a bond with me. This will be a long battle.”
Lorraine held back her golden hair, blown by the sea breeze. “If that's the case, I'm kind of glad.” The girl smiled at herself.
"Because I can join the fight too. Not just Dai-chan and Grandpa, but me too. I can fight the demon horde. I refuse to just be protected."
“That strong heart draws me in… and rejects me. It's like my unrequited love. But I waited thousands of years to meet this love. I will never give up on you.”
Cold waves washed over Lorraine's bare feet. “I think I understand that feeling a little.”
“Of course you do. We're alike. That's why we met.”
“You chose this on your own, didn't you?
“Love is one-sided. Now, go.” The form of her other self gradually faded. “Outside of you, the battle still rages on.”
“I know. Everyone's calling me.”
“Give my regards to my kin. And to your... Hououji Daiga, too.”
For an instant, the wind strengthened, and like a streamer blown away, the other self vanished. Suddenly, Lorraine felt her body grow light.
Looking down at her skin, the tattoo had shrunk small on her left arm.
Nodding, the girl stepped onto the shoreline.

“Lorraine...” Zett and Hadley spoke in unison. Black bubbles burst as the blonde girl descended silently. Then the ritual space dissolved away, and the surrounding scene changed completely. Sunlight poured down, sea breezes blew. Before they knew it, they were on the deck of the Critias.

“Your Majesty, surely not...” Skorzeny was speechless, staring at the shrunken tattoo.
But Lorraine paid him no mind, rushing to the fallen scientist. “Hold on, Mr. Sykes!”
The face she lifted was deathly pale. “...I'm so glad you're safe... Lorraine. I... I thought maybe I could do something too... So... I went to the armory...”
Keep talking, Mr. Sykes!” Lorraine swiftly tore the sleeve from her lab coat.
She pressed it against the wound on his abdomen, trying to stop Sykes' bleeding.
“Dai-chan will be here soon. Hang on until then!”
“Did I... get a little closer to him...” Sykes smiled bravely. “I think... I got a little... stronger too.”
“Not just a little. A whole lot.” Lorraine answered, not letting the overflowing blood defeat her. “But that's enough now. Leave the rest to everyone else.”
Sykes gazed happily at the girl embracing him. A sense of fulfillment spread across his face. “Thank you, Lorraine...”
At that instant, a sharp whistling sound cut through the air. Something grazed Lorraine's cheek and plunged into Sykes' left chest.
Immediately, Lorraine's body was splattered with blood.
What embedded in his chest was a demonic tomahawk. “Mr. Sykes!”
Struck by the blade, Sykes spat dark, murky blood from his mouth. “Guh... ugh!”
His white coat stained crimson, his body shook violently from the shock of blood loss.
Lorraine tried to press against the wound, but blood gushed forth like a fountain. “No... no...!” Then the girl turned at the presence of Byte Gogo.
The colossus, his rage exposed, was engulfed in flames - yet the demon's face, looking down on Sykes, even bore a smile. “Revenge for Marseille... and my own vengeance.” His face, half-peeled and scarred, growled low.
“How dare you expose us to this despicable sunlight... But we are the Trinity.”
Then, behind Byte Gogo, Skorzeny formed a strange seal. He chanted an indistinct incantation, and demonic script spilled from between his fingers.
They swiftly danced through the air, completely enveloping Byte Gogo's body.
“Byte Gogo... Repel the light and flames with my counter-symbols.”
Skorzeny maintained the seal as he spoke. “Then you shall be able to fight without fearing the sun.” True to the words of the celestial realm, the symbols extinguished the flames from Byte Gogo. Not only that, they even regenerated the flesh that had melted away.Within seconds, Byte Gogo regained a body without a single scratch.
“If only your body were like this, you might have been saved.”
Coated in the demonic characters, ByteGogo smiled. Sykes, realizing his strike had been wasted, gritted his teeth in agony.
"...Th-then... one more time...” The dying assistant struggled to shoulder the launcher once more, but more blood gushed from his mouth, his breathing already precarious.
Lorraine looked up at the sky, trying to scream with all her might. “Dai-chan...!”
But Sykes grabbed the girl's hand. With his last ounce of strength, he squeezed out a trembling voice. “Daiga-kun's... Blood Soul... is meant to defeat the demon horde... Don't waste it.”

“It's not a waste! You're important to me!” Lorraine shouted with all her strength. “Just a little longer! Please hold on just a little longer!”

“But... but I'm already...” The moment a human loses the will to live. Lorraine understood it.

“Mr. Sykes, hold my hand! Please!” There was no reply. Sykes' eyelids closed.

Lorraine found herself speechless too. It was then.

“That's it. Wait until Daiga arrives.” Zett clasped Sykes' hand, as if channeling the strength to live fiercely. Zett's face was drained of color, yet his eyes fixed on Sykes held a revived fighting spirit.

“You beat me to defeating the demon horde... This time, it's my turn. If you die without seeing it, I'll never forgive you.”

“Zett...-san...” Infused with fiery strength, Sykes' eyelids fluttered open once more.

Zett forced his gaze into Sykes' eyes. “You saved me twice... Don't take that debt with you to the afterlife.”

“Zett-san... Biologically... the demon horde remains unexplained... But I understand... The horde... is an evil existence... They cannot coexist with humans...”

Sykes answered, his mouth covered in blood. “If creatures like that existed... everyone in the world... would suffer terribly... Ms. Lorraine wouldn't find happiness either... That's why I...”

“Mr. Sykes, don't close your eyes again!” At the girl's voice, Sykes flashed a brief smile.

“I... to you...” His final breath escaped. Lorraine's hand trembled.

Still, the girl held back her sobs and closed Sykes' eyelids.

Zett's shoulders shook, his trembling fists clenched tight. “You're a despicable bastard, Sykes... You deceived me until the very end. Pretending to be weak, when in truth you were far more...” The farewell words trailed off there.

Zett rose, readying his Wartlas and the chakram. “You taught me my eyes were blind. In return, I'll offer you the head of a demon. You may be unwilling, but consider it a companion for your journey to the afterlife.”

“Blind? How self-deprecating.” Baitogogo, still wrapped in counter-charms, addressed Zett. “So you've finally realized that your reptilian eyes can't see humans clearly. Too little, too late.”

Zett closed the distance silently. His gaze was already locked onto Byte Gogo.

“But I have no choice but to fight with these blind eyes of mine.”

He spoke coldly through his venomous gaze. “Even if I can't see human courage, I'll show you the true form of a demon.”

“Hoho, with those ugly eyes?” As if responding to the provocation, Zett leapt.

He unleashed chakrams left and right while simultaneously firing a petrifying beam.

But Byte Gogo effortlessly dodged the rings and retreated. As for Zett's gaze, it ended up flying off in a completely different direction.

“Repeating the same move, huh? And your aim is inaccurate too.” Byte Gogo laughed openly. “I'm not the kind of guy you can take down with that – don’t underestimate me.” The demon spread his bat-like wings, preparing to counterattack from the air.

But Zett's snake eyes were certain of victory. “I wasn't aiming for you. I was aiming for your back.”

Hearing this, Baitgogo turned to look behind him - in the air, the spinning cutting rings were still flying.

Zett's gaze struck its surface. The metal ring, reflecting the beam, deflected the gaze at a perfect angle. Baitogogo finally noticed the glint of the rotating cutting ring.

“That chakram... its a mirror!” The chakram Zett had thrown was fully mirror-coated. It altered the beam's trajectory, piercing from a direction that defied Baitogogo's expectations.

"Gahhhhhh!!!” The petrification spread across its entire body before their eyes, and the demon horde froze rigid in place. “You... you bastard...!”

“Consider it an honor. To be the first demon Zett Hannibal has ever defeated.” Zett declared to the struggling Baitgogo. “Your name will be etched into history forever. Though, it will be the history books I write.”

“Baitgogo!” Even Skorzeny stopped chanting. The petrification swallowed the counter-spell, nullifying the demon's defenses.

All Byte Gogo could do now was raise his hand slightly. "The life I finally gained... is crushed... Lord Skorzeny... ...Please give my regards to the Fuhrer... My tattoos will sleep once more. Until I meet a new host...!"

Zett's arm flung another rotating cutting ring - it pierced Byte Gogo's skull, cleaving the petrified giant in two. The underworld demon couldn't move an inch, forced to accept his own deaths. The New Mexico killer transformed into a pile of dust.

“The gate will open, Byte Gogo.” The Heavenly Demon Horde gnashed its teeth at the dying Native American. “You go ahead to your mother's tomb. You fought well.”

As if hearing those words, black vapor rose. The essence of the demon was blown away by the sea breeze crossing Yokohama.

The chakram returned silently to Zett's hand as he looked up. “You're the only one left, Skorzeny.” Zett glanced at the scientist who had breathed his last behind him.

“I wish Sykes could have seen this. The revenge for Dr. Grant.”

“Don't talk big, Zett Hannibal.” The Heavenly Demon Group Skorzeny raised his rapier. “There's no way you can defeat me alone - and protecting Miss Lorraine Rosenberg is an impossible task.”

“Your Trinity Squad has collapsed.” Zett slid the chakram between his fingers. “Show me if you can fight solo.”

“Then, allow me to demonstrate.” The Heavenly Demon wore a smile surpassing defiance. Shadows stretched from Scorzeny's blade tip, spreading a dim darkness.

Before long, the flight deck was enveloped in a hemispherical darkness - it completely blocked the sunlight that had finally appeared. Moreover, the darkness gradually took shape, transforming into a vast garden. However, the trees were twisted black, and the flowers and grasses were saturated with poisonous hues.

Then, a rumbling. Behind Skorzeny, a colossal structure rose.

The white palace radiated an ominous dread, threatening to overwhelm Zett.

“Another Vienna sightseeing tour? Don’t remember asking for one.” Realizing the palace's true nature, Zett declared. “Completed in the 18th century, Austria's largest palace and the Habsburg dynasty's summer residence—is this not where the six-year-old Mozart performed his piano recital?”

"Be grateful you may die at Schönbrunn Palace. This is the garden beloved by Empress Maria Theresa. It is solemn and beautiful, fitting for my Suppressed Domain."

Skorzeny held his rapier before his face. “And my servant is the guardian of this palace.”

With those words, an anomaly occurred at the palace's highest point.

Perched upon the roof was a massive, black statue. Naturally, it depicted the Habsburg dynasty's coat of arms. It began to shake violently. Then, a black flash erupted from within the statue. Zett flinched involuntarily, hearing a piercing scream.

“Under the banner of the double-headed eagle...!”

That melody was none other than the triumphal song of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The statue of the double-headed eagle, symbol of the Habsburg dynasty, flapped its wings powerfully. Its wingspan exceeded five meters, and shrieks erupted from both heads. Whirling up a whirlwind, it soared toward Zett.

“Zett-san!”

“Stay down! I'll finish this quickly!” Zett shouted to Lorraine.

“Whether it flies or not, it doesn't matter to me. I'll just cut it to pieces.” Zett executed a spinning slash, and a demonic smile twisted his features.

“Not enough? Then let's add a few more opponents.” As if on cue, Skorzeny raised his blade. The soaring double-headed eagle began to blur in midair.

Before anyone could react, its massive form split in two. Two became four, four became eight. In an instant, Zett's headspace was swallowed by a swarm of eagles.

Over one hundred and twenty birds circled and screeched, hunting for prey.

Major Hadley gritted his teeth against the pain and pulled the spear embedded in his body free. “Captain, order the Marines to storm the containment chamber... mobilize all remaining forces for a counterattack...” His voice, transmitted through the microphone at his mouth, reached the bridge.

Captain Ramsey rallied the Marines who had survived the bat assault.

“All assault-capable units, to the deck. All weapons are authorized for unrestricted use.”

Despite the bats' fierce attack, the tough Marines sprinted to the deck. Now that two of the demonic hordes were dead, this was the moment for counterattack. Everyone was doing just that - but Skorzeny had no intention of overlooking the approaching military boots either.

“Slaughter the intruders. This ship too.” With a strange cry, half the double-headed eagles burst out of the containment space. They descended to intercept the advancing Marines, swinging their massive beaks down - the blows shattered the tough helmet, crushing skulls. When met with gunfire, they soared into the air, flapping their wings to create gale-force winds.

Marines who fell were torn apart by the sharp beaks before they could even get up.

“Advance is impossible, Captain! We can't get close to the Suppressed Domain!”

Ramsey heard the marines' cries with a bitter expression. “I'll provide covering fire. Everyone, take cover.” Ramsey had already locked onto every double-headed eagle. As soon as the order was given to the Critias' close-in weapon system, the 25mm seven-barrel cannons unleashed a furious barrage of fire toward the Double-Headed Eagle's relentless bullet storm. There was no way it could dodge seventy rounds per second, four thousand two hundred rounds per minute.

Reiko, on the bridge, thought the same - but the Double-Headed Eagle on the monitor moved too fast to be caught by the auto-tracking barrels.

As if teleporting, it darted freely across the ship's deck, evading the barrage.

Skorzeny watched its valiant fight with calm detachment. “This is no Bats of Baitgogo. The minions of a Celestial Demon are on an entirely different level.”

The double-headed eagle then attacked the ship itself. It shattered the spherical radar and crushed weapons from blind spots. “Now you can't reach inside the ship either. Next, it's your turn.” When Skorzeny turned his face, Zett was already moving.

Gripping his Wartlas, he slashed toward the Heavenly Demon's head. “I don't care how many chess pieces you have. I'm taking the king” Zett aimed for Skorzeny's crown. “This ends everything. Your life, and my obsession!”

But a double-headed eagle forcibly intercepted Zett's charge - it slammed its massive body into him, slamming Zett onto the deck. Another double-headed eagle tore into his back with its talons. Hadley cried out involuntarily as Zett bounced violently. Gritting his teeth against agony, Zett glared at the Heavenly Demon.
Before Scorzeny, the returning double-headed eagles formed an orderly line.
A dense, compact formation. They moved to encircle Zett.
Facing the great horde, Skorzeny raised his blade. “Zett, you're the one who'll join Sykes in death.”
“Guh...”
“If you can't even speak, so be it. Die clinging to your unyielding obsession.”
Hearing the voice echoing through the garden, Zett accepted his fate.
But the darkness echoing with laughter suddenly trembled.
It swayed violently, warping as pressure was applied from outside.
The double-headed eagles too looked up at the disturbance in the controlled space.
Then, a crimson light began spreading across the ceiling.
“So you’ve come at last...” Skorzeny twitched the scar on his cheek. “Daiga Hououji.”

Explosion. A rift tore through the darkness.
Raging torrent. A crimson flash illuminated the shadows.
Gale. He sliced through the controlled space and raced down onto the deck.
Flailing his blue wings, he landed in position to protect Lorraine.
Daiga, blade of the phoenix drawn, descended into the heart of the darkness.
“Daiga!” The girl screamed, still clutching Sykes’ lifeless body.
But Daiga did not return her words - he only fixed his gaze upon the Celestial Demon.
Yet when he saw the boy's face, Scorzeny's own face twisted. “You...!”
Zett and Hadley too lost their voices at the sight of Daiga's face.
Tears streamed down his cheeks as he faced the double-headed eagle.
Daiga showed no attempt to hide his grief and fury - but these were no ordinary tears. Daiga's tears were stained crimson, like blood.
Moreover, like the Phoenix Blade, it even emitted a brilliant glow.
Zett realized the true nature of the tears and let out a growl. “The Blood Soul...!”
From Daiga's eyes, boiling rage toward the demon horde welled up like blood tears.
Daiga flicked his face and wiped away the tears only he could shed.
“This ain't no time for crying, Zett.” Daiga called out.
“Let's scatter them all at once. Come.”
“But there are too many - and they're different from yesterday's bats.” Zett pointed at the swarm of double-headed eagles. “Don't let your rage make you reckless. They're tough.” But even as Zett hesitated, Daiga closed the distance.
“Lorraine, keep count.”
“Wh-what, Dai-chan...”
“I'm taking Sykes down with me. Even if they're monsters, more is better.” Lorraine stared at the boy's back.
To Daiga, now winged, Lorraine answered softly. “...Mr. Sykes... he tried his best.”
“I know. I'll avenge him and Yokohama.” Then Daiga leapt. No, vanished.

The instant after kicking off the deck, he was already before the swarm - even those double-headed eagles couldn't grasp Daiga's movement. To the astonished monsters, Daiga swung the Suzaku Blade.

“Six!” Lorraine's startled voice rang out.

A crimson flash erupted from the Blade's strike, mowing down the enemy ranks.

Simultaneously, six double-headed eagles were cleaved clean in two and exploded.

“Fourteen!” A devastating blow. Yet Daiga immediately brought down his next strike.

This time, eight enemies perished without a chance to react. Daiga pressed forward. He swung his blade again. “Twenty-two! Fifty-one!” Before Lorraine could blink, the double-headed eagles were being cleaved in two, swarm by swarm.

Like Moses parting the sea, Daiga split the enemy army down the middle.

“Don't retreat! Don't retreat!” Skorzeny roared, his throat straining - but the double-headed eagles merely floundered about, unable to seize even a chance to counterattack.

The first to grasp the reason was Zett. “The Genbu Shield...!”

Black light clung to every inch of Daiga's body.

The Genbu Shield. Blood souls had become Daiga's armor - but it wasn't merely defensive. The black armor left countless afterimages around Daiga.

They moved exactly like Daiga himself, swinging the Phoenix Blade.

It looked as if Daiga was fighting alongside countless duplicates - and the double-headed eagles couldn't grasp Daiga himself, only falling one after another.

Even with the keen eyesight of a predator snatching prey from the sky, it couldn't fully lock onto Daiga. Major Hadley himself shuddered at the sight of this battle.

“What a man. To become a stealth fighter itself.”

“One hundred and twenty!” By the time Lorraine shouted, the entire swarm had vanished without a trace.

Only one remained.

Daiga fixed his gaze on the Waffen-SS uniform. “...So you're the Celestial Demon?”

“Indeed. Otto Skorzeny, former Waffen-SS Major General.” The Heavenly Demon clapped exaggeratedly. “Still, your skill is impressive. Was yesterday's blunder an act? If so, you're a better actor than I am. I've been had.”

“It doesn't take much time for a man to grow stronger.” Daiga radiated heat from his body. “One night is enough. Look at Sykes and you'll understand.”

He thrust the blade's tip toward Skorzeny. “It was you demons who made Sykes face his fate. But I didn't want him to fight like that. I don't mind standing alone on the battlefield.”

Zett, still lying on the ground, turned his face toward Daiga as he spoke. “You're not alone. Don't forget I'm here too.”

His face twisted in agony, but his fighting spirit alone boiled over. “Every last one of you steals my moment. I'm fighting too.”

Daiga didn't answer immediately - but for the midst of battle, he stared at Zett for a considerable time. His eyes had changed to an unnaturally calm light.

“...Don't push yourself. This isn't your fight alone.”

“...Yeah. Sykes taught me that.” Zett's voice too held a peaceful resignation.

Daiga let out a hot breath and closed the distance to Skorzeny. “Gonna run without atoning for your sins?” He said it without a moment's pause. “I won't let you get away I want to hear what you did to Lorraine too.”

But the Heavenly Demon horde facing him merely curved their lips slightly. “Fighting this hard isn't bad at all.” Skorzeny retreated without changing his expression.

“And as for what Miss Lorraine saw, you can ask her yourself. She may only remember it for a short time, but either way, you still have time."

The Heavenly Demon flicked his torn cloak. "Farewell for now, young lady. I'll give up for today, but I'll come back for you soon. Until then, I'd like you to protect your dreams well - because you are our bride.”

Lorraine stood up straight at Scorzeny's words. “Before you leave, please restore that city to how it was.” Pointing at Yokohama, the girl said. "Bring back all the dead people too... . Restore everything. Then I might forgive you. If you can't..."

“And what if I can't, young lady?”

“I will simply fight within myself.” Her blonde hair danced like a rustling wind. Her blue eyes flashed a fierce light at the demon horde. Lorraine approached Skorzeny without hesitation. "I will never forgive you. For stealing my father and mother, for taking Daichan's mother — I will make you pay for it... I will make you pay for it with this tattoo...!"

“Lorraine...” Daiga heard that voice from the girl for the first time. And her gaze, the conviction overflowing from her entire being. Lorraine radiated an aura so formidable that even Daiga retreated.

At that sight, Skorzeny's lips curled into a smile. “Well, it seems I'm not exactly popular, am I?” His voice carried a hint of amusement. Then, behind Skorzeny, demonic runes formed a square pattern. Was it an escape route to another dimension? The Heavenly Demon gathered at its center.

“Don't let him escape, Daiga!”

Major Hadley shouted hoarsely.

If Scorzeny wasn't taken down here, who knew what schemes he'd employ next.

That concern wasn't just Hadley's; Daiga shared it too.

But Scorzeny had already set foot on the escape route.

He'd likely slip away easily before the Crimson Blade could reach him.

Daiga's thoughts raced for an instant... then a contemptuous smile spread across his face.

“Skorzeny, dance with me.” It was a blatant challenge.

Daiga stepped sharply into the demon's range.

At that movement, even the Heavenly Demon Horde halted their retreat. “You have the nerve to say that at your age.” Skorzeny burst from the escape route, thrusting his rapier forward. The blade sliced through the wind with cunning flexibility, its tip striking from an unpredictable angle. Daiga's cheek, his shoulder, were slashed by the slender blade. “You cannot read my sword, Hououji Daiga.”

The Heavenly Demon, splattered with blood, seemed to be enjoying the fight.

“That was a foolish provocation. I’ve dueled for longer than you have lived.”

Indeed, Skorzeny's swordsmanship surpassed Daiga's movements - yet amidst the flurry of strikes, Daiga calmly declared.

“No... I've read you now.”
“What?”
“You yourself.” With that, Daiga struck the rapier's blade with his glowing fist, snapping it clean. The slender point couldn't withstand the impact of Byakko’s Fist.
Scorzeny scrambled back in panic, and Daiga closed the distance. This time, the Phoenix Blade pierced deep into the Heavenly Demon Horde's solar plexus.
Daiga leaned close to Scorzeny, who gasped with his mouth open. “I didn't want to let you escape.”
“Agh...!”
“That's why I did it deliberately. I knew you would never turn down a duel.”
Scorzeny looked at Daiga gripping the blade.
“Before reading the movements of my sword... did you read my mind?”
“Exactly. I've heard stories about you since I was a child.”
“Th-then who told you...”

Daiga didn't answer that question. Instead, he pushed the blade in, driving the tip all the way through to his back. "I thought you were a bit more sensible. Even a master of ambushes like you, I never imagined you'd team up with a scum like Bolman. You hated those who ruled without stepping onto the battlefield."

“You've studied well... That's correct.” Skorzeny murmured his praise.

"But that was before I died... As death approached, I craved victory. Even if called a hero... I hated being on the losing side. And I'm a fugitive. If I could be reborn as a victor, I'd use even the current Führer..."

Then the Heavenly Demon gripped Daiga's wrist tightly. “Do you blame me for wanting to live as a victor?” Zett and Hadley also stared at that question. But in Daiga's eyes, there was no hint of agreement whatsoever.

“...You only lost to yourself. You just want to drag yourself along, clinging to life by following your own desires. And on top of that, calling yourself a victor? That's laughable. I won't accept such a half-assed life.”

Blood Souls spurted forcefully from Daiga's blade.

Skorzeny convulsed, coursed through by the energy expelling the demon. “No... I don't want it... I don't need the fame of a loser anymore... What I want is victory... Victory... That's all... I won't let a scum like you ruin my life...!”

Daiga swiftly drew the Crimson Blade and stepped back.

Scorzeny, overcome with agony, tore his SS uniform to shreds.

Upon his chest, the double-headed eagle emblem writhed violently.

"This thirst for victory... is the power that summoned the tattoo... If I don't win here, I...”

As he shouted, the Blood Soul within his body exploded.

A crimson flash shattered the Heavenly Demon, setting his flesh ablaze from within.

The double-headed eagle tattoo transformed into black vapor, dissolving into the sea breeze.

Daiga seized it in his hand. “Whether I'm the victor or the vanquished... that's not for me to decide.” He spoke those words to his fist. “The one who decides... is the person watching me. Right?” Under the sun that had returned once more, Daiga posed the question to Zett.

Zett, his face contorted in agony, raised himself up. “You're right. But you'd be dead wrong to think I'll acknowledge you right away.”

Pressing down the flowing blood, Zett turned his gaze to his comrade. “The winner I've decided on today is Sykes. It's a shame I can't tell him that.”

The sea breeze gently caressed the deck. Daiga knelt beside the fallen corpse.

"Look closely at Sykes' face. The truly victorious man looks peaceful even in death."

“...Yeah. I'll try to learn from that. When my time comes.”

Large tears fell from Lorraine's face as she held the corpse.

Daiga wiped them away with his finger and pulled the girl close.

Zett and Hadley also gazed at the dead victor for a moment.

All the warriors could share was silence.

A prolonged stillness flowed through the conference room.

The 3D display showed Yokohama's cityscape bathed in summer sunlight.
Finally, the cabinet could witness the extent of the damage firsthand.
“The sandstorm has dissipated. Can we consider the crisis over?”
The Chief Cabinet Secretary answered the Prime Minister's question.
"That assessment is correct. We just made contact with Inspector General Sakimizu of the Ziegen Agency. The demon horde has been repelled. Hououji Daiga is also safe, it seems."
“Oh,” murmurs rose from the cabinet members. And finally, they remembered their own duties.
“Change the state of emergency declaration to an emergency declaration. Contact all ministries and agencies.”
“Notify the Nerima First Division on standby. Proceed immediately to rescue the victims.”
“Suspension of trading on the Tokyo market starting Monday. Inform New York and London accordingly.” The commotion flowed in and out of the conference room.
With that buzz behind him, the Prime Minister approached the old man.
“Muyori-san…”
“It's begun.”
Amidst everyone's frantic efforts to wrap things up, the rogue murmured.
“This incident means the Demon Horde has changed their tactics.”
“What do you mean?”
“They've shown themselves publicly.” The rogue leaned back comfortably in the heavy chair. “Probably meant as a show of force. An existence beyond humanity is targeting humans. They wanted to make that clear.”
“And to crush human resistance?”
“That would be cute if that were all.” With a deep sigh, the old man closed his eyes.
“Seeing the power of the demon horde, more humans will surely be drawn to them. Eventually, humans will turn against each other over the demon horde and start killing each other.”
“That can't be...”
"It's no lie. Many humans have seen the Messerschmitt controlled by the demon horde. If footage is captured, it will spread around the world in no time. When that happens, people who want that power will surely appear."
The Prime Minister looked at the holographic display again.
The NHK news was still only showing the disaster site.
There was no sign of the propeller fighter plane or the boy with wings.
However, the Prime Minister's throat trembled with tension.
“For the time being, we will neither confirm nor deny it.” After stating this firmly, the Prime Minister composed himself. “Even if rumors of demonic hordes spread among the people, the tale is far too absurd. I believe we still have time before anyone can be certain.”
“Right. In the meantime, we'll figure something out.” The rogue scratched his head and stood up. “If the rumors just stay rumors and die down, that'll be fine.”
“What do you intend to do, Elder Hōōji?” The Prime Minister pressed the old man.

“Do you have some brilliant plan to protect us...?”
“Don't rush things. It won't come so quickly.” The rogue smiled, his face scarred. “First, I need to see my grandchildren's faces. After all, it's Daiga and Lorraine who will fight.” With that, the rogue exited the murmuring conference room.
Not a single soul paid any mind to the departing old man.
Much less did anyone sense a surging fighting spirit in that aged back.
The Japanese government was stretched to its limits just scrambling to rebuild.

【Epilogue 1】

The mountain lodge sat upon a gentle green slope. The elegant building, surrounded by blue skies and trees, presented a picture-postcard view. The large bedroom window stood wide open, drawing in the morning breeze. He sat upon the bed in that bedroom.
“I feel it, Scorzeny. The hatred you endured.” He said, picking up a glass of Moselle wine. His black SS uniform was a surprisingly simple outfit for the Führer.
“To be hated so much for destroying just one port town. Thanks to that, you lost your host bodies. Hououji Daiga and his gang are truly despicable scum.”
The Führer raised his glass toward the table. On the table, illuminated by the morning sun, lay three severed heads. Skorzeny. Baitogogo. And Marseille.
The three demons lay side by side, their faces serene in death.
“But mark my words, your deaths shall not be in vain. I will build the Fourth Reich upon this earth. It shall be a truly free nation, where only the chosen gather.”
The Führer took a sip of Moselle wine. “Of course, those ignorant fools at the Siegengang Agency misunderstand. They believe I'm still bound by Nazi doctrine, still rigidly clinging to the idea of a chosen people. But that's wrong. Dead wrong.”
With a hint of a smile, the Führer continued. “If I clung to the Aryan race, I wouldn't be using people like Baitgogo or Old Man Vow. Those joining the new empire are truly exceptional individuals, regardless of ethnicity. Only God can discern that. And in this world, the Demon Horde is equal to God.”
A cold wind blew in through the window. Then the three heads dissolved into black vapor and vanished into the sky. Until the Führer found new hosts, the true nature of the Demon Horde fell back into slumber. The Führer remained seated, watching them depart.
"Humans have devised countless ways to measure their kind — intelligence, physical prowess, social class... Yet all proved flawed. None could truly identify the truly exceptional. But the Demon Horde knows. From all seventy-five human races, they find those whose thirst overwhelms all others and mark them with tattoos. Their wisdom shall be the standard of our empire."
The Führer suddenly stifled a laugh.
"Truthfully, the previous Führer knew it too. That obsession with the Aryan race. You remember, don't you, the fate of the Waffen-SS? Initially, only pure-blooded Aryans could enlist, with family trees traced back a hundred years. But in the crucible of war, they were whittled down until they had to accept even foreign

races. As for the volunteers, there were even Indian units! He was furious at first, but he killed himself in the end." After a moment of laughter, the man stroked his cheek. “I won't make such a foolish mistake. If they're chosen by the Demon Horde, I'll take them under my command, regardless of race. And they... YOU will never be worn down. As long as there are new hosts, the Demon Horde will keep fighting onward.” The man glanced back at the bed where he sat.

Five naked women lay sprawled across the white sheets, drenched in sweat.

Three more lay on the floor. Two on the sofa. Caucasian, Asian, Latin...

Women of varying tastes swarmed around him, from bewitching adults to young girls.

“My thirst, too, knows no end.”

The Führer laughed and stood up.

The first woman I drowned was ten years older than me.

The mistress of the farm where I worked.

I still remember the thrill of making love in the stable, hidden from her husband.

Ever since then, I've been thirsty.

Women crawled at his feet.

They reached out fingers in worship, caressing the man's body.

He looked down at them with satisfaction. “Among the thirty-six celestial demons, none hunger as I do. That is precisely why I must force open that gate. The gate called Lorraine Rosenberg...” The morning sun vanished abruptly. A sudden blackout. Dark clouds engulfed the mountain lodge.

Soon, thunder roared, and the distinct screams of ten women echoed.

Amid the sudden, relentless downpour, Martin Bormann's feast continued endlessly.

【Epilogue 2】

The spacious cabin of the Critias was crowded with injured crew members - though some critically wounded had already been airlifted off the ship, many remained.

Daiga continued healing the gravely injured with his healing arts until the sun began to set.

“Thank you. You should rest too.” Captain Ramsey handed Daiga a drink tube. “You haven't eaten properly, have you? If you don't take a break, you'll collapse too.”

“I'm not the type to collapse over something like this.”

When Daiga said this, the captain's long eyelashes fluttered.

“We got word from the marines at Landmark Tower. They recovered Dr. Grant's remains.”

“Are they bringing it back with Sykes' body?”

“Yes. They fought together the whole time.”

Daiga said nothing and left the room.

In a corner of the cabin, Lorraine was wiping the sweat from her forehead. She had been helping the medical team with the treatment, and had finally taken off her white coat, but instead of leaving the cabin, she walked up the stairs leading to the deck.

Daiga watched her go, but walked over to one of the beds. “Sorry about that.”
He took a drink from his tube and plopped down into a chair.
Zett lay on the bed right beside him. Without looking at his expression, Daiga continued.
“Leaving you alone with Lorraine...”
“Don't treat me like I'm beneath you. That was exactly the battlefield I wanted.” Zett answered, still staring at the ceiling. “Colonel Dietrich trained me for today. I can't say I gave it a hundred percent, but I should at least pass.”
“Huh, Dad's grading sure is lenient.”
“Usually, a father's grading is stricter in these situations. Then again, you probably don't have any memories of being loved by the Colonel. I spent far more time with him than you did.” Zett's face wore a hint of triumphant pride.
But to Daiga, Zett's reaction seemed strangely endearing. “True, you know more about my old man than I do. I don't even remember his face.”
“For an unworthy son, I'll report he turned out pretty well.”
“But you know... I did remember something.” Daiga scratched the tip of his nose.
"I recently remembered when my mom died. Since then, memories from my childhood have gradually come flooding back."
“Huh. But the time the Colonel spent with you...”
“Was very brief. That's precisely why it's come back so vividly.” Daiga swallowed a cold drink. "It was probably after Mom died. Some big man would tell me bedtime stories right by my ear while I lay in bed. And... It's funny, right? War stories. Like General Rommel's exploits, or how powerful the Tiger tanks were."
“Wait, so you...”
“Yeah. I heard about Skorzeny and Captain Marseille from that same person too. Lately, I've been remembering those stories, one after another.”
Then Zett suddenly turned his gaze toward Daiga. His eyes held an indescribable envy.
Ignoring it, Daiga rose from his chair. “So, if you ever report back to your old man, tell him this. His son hasn't forgotten his father. He's grown into a man who can rattle off the names of German Luftwaffe aces like they're nothing... Still, couldn't he come up with more fun stories to put a kid to sleep?”
“...He couldn't. Not him.”
“One dad he is. Thanks for telling.” Daiga turned his back and walked out of the cabin.
Zett, left behind, stood dumbfounded. Then, from the next bunk, Major Hadley sat up.
“Your face is giving it away, Zett.”
“Even if my beloved disciple loses to my own son, I feel no regret.” Zett forced a smile.
“Besides, I saw what Daiga's capable of. Next time we fight, I'll outmaneuver him for sure. I won't rest until the Colonel acknowledges me. And there'll be plenty of chances.”
“He's conscious of that now, you know” Reiko approached, her face looking a little worn.
She sat on Zett's bunk and looked between the two men. “Daiga has no memory of his father. That's why he looks at Zett, trying to form the outline of a father figure. Inside his own heart.”
Zett's expression immediately turned displeased. “Miss Sakimizu. Your kind heart is admirable, but I'd appreciate some sympathy for me too.”

“Oh? What are you talking about?”
“Why do you sit on my right leg? Especially one that's just been injured?”
In the bed, Zett fidgeted his leg. “Knowingly sitting there is blatant harassment. What exactly did I do?”
“I heard you nearly dragged Lorraine into the ritual space with you.”
When Reiko shifted her weight onto his buttocks, Zett arched his back and groaned in agony. “T-tattling is cowardly, Major Hadley. I was merely fulfilling my duty.”
“Then spill it. What was the mission the Colonel ordered you to carry out?”
“It goes without saying, but surely you know.”
Zett scratched his hair irritably. “Kill Lorraine if necessary. That was Colonel Dietrich's order.”
“And you can do that?”
“At least Daiga can't. And if it's the Colonel's order...”
“You'll accomplish anything, won't you? You really are the Colonel's favorite pupil.”
Reiko clasped her fingers tightly together in prayer. “I hope nothing bad happens.”
“It might already be happening.” Hadley stared out the window where the setting sun shone through.
“I wonder what dreams she saw in that black foam.” Pondering this, the three fell silent.
Finding the answer first wasn't their role.

At the large pier, the Critias basked fully in the sunset.
The water surface shimmered orange, rippling gently.
Looking west, countless sirens could be heard from the still-chaotic city of Yokohama.
But the girl turned her back on that, her eyes fixed on the darkening eastern sea.
Daiga approached Lorraine with light footsteps. “Lorraine, listen...”
“...Dai-chan, just a little longer.” The girl spoke without turning around.
“Just a little longer, let me stay here. I thought treating the injured might help me forget a little, but I still can't...” Lorraine's face, standing on the deck, bore the clear marks of exhaustion - yet that very weariness gave her expression an oddly mature air.
Daiga gently touched her golden hair, fluttering in the wind.
“You're stronger than anyone. You've always taken everything head-on. But when you can't carry it all alone, I'll shoulder half the burden with you.”
“…” Lorraine stared silently at Daiga.
Sensing the hesitation in her eyes, Daiga took her hand.
“What did you see in the black foam? You said you might have seen me in your dream. Did you remember it?”
Then Lorraine pulled her hand away from Daiga. As if fleeing. As if afraid of something.
“I'm sorry, Dai-chan. I... I lied. The truth is, I remember it all. What the dream was like... clearly...” She confessed with downcast eyes, as if confessing a sin.
“The dream the tattoo showed me must be my feelings. It's still small, but it's the reason I the tattoo is inside me.”
“Don't talk nonsense.” Daiga exhaled roughly. “That's a lie from the tattoo. There's no way you have something like that.”
"No, I know. That was my true feelings."

Daiga choked on his breath at the girl's confident voice. “Can you tell me about that dream?”
“No, I can't. I absolutely can't. Especially not to you, Daiga.”
“What the hell is that supposed to mean? What exactly was I doing in your dream...?”
“Don't ask anymore. There are things a girl just doesn't want to talk about.”
As if remembering something, Lorraine flushed bright red up to her neck.
Seeing her grip the hem of her clothes as if she might tear it off, Daiga's intuition kicked in. “Alright, Lorraine. I won't ask about the dream anymore.”
“Yeah, thanks.”
“But in return, answer my last question. Just yes or no.”
“Huh? Huh?”
“In my dream, was I wearing clothes? Yes or no?”
“I-I-I can't answer that...”
“Then one more thing. Were you wearing clothes? Just answer that.”
“Y-Y-YES! Yes! Of course it was yes! Definitely yes!”
Her face redder than before, Lorraine waved her hands around.
While being patted on the chest, Daiga scratched his cheek with his finger.
“Damn. I was trying to trick you, but did you really have that sorta dream?”
“No way! Ugh, Dai-chan, you're so mean!”
“Don't be so embarrassed. But if that's the kind of dream, I'm having it too.”
Hearing this, Lorraine suddenly stopped moving.
She stared intently up at Daiga, then gradually looked down.
Daiga scratched his head and looked away from the girl.
“I mean, I'm a guy too. Besides, if you were the one in my dreams, I wouldn't mind, right?”
“That... I can't answer that.”
“Whatever. But if we're dreaming the same thing anyway, I wish that tattoo would transfer to me.” Daiga gently took hold of Lorraine's left arm.
The tattoo was vividly etched into her translucent white skin. Facing it, Daiga bared his teeth. “Hey, you can hear me, right? Don't just stay silent—answer me.”
Then, the tattoo slowly moved its limbs. t turned its face toward Daiga, casting a seductive gaze. Lorraine flicked it away with her finger, filled with resentment at its lewd, foolish display. “This tattoo said that it’s the Queen Demon...”
“A demon horde... I knew it.”
“Yeah. It said it would take over my body someday.”
The realization finally shot through Daiga's spine - but the moment he faced reality, his fighting spirit surged. “Then I'll tell you this. Don't think you can stay there forever.” Daiga declared to the lewdly smiling tattoo. “And never peer into our dreams again.”
“Daiga...” Lorraine lowered her face bashfully, and the tattoo smiled faintly.
“Nurture it, the joyful dream. It becomes my sustenance, my flesh. To the young lovers, eternal blessings from the darkness.”
Daiga reached out for the tattooed woman, but the demoness vanished swiftly into Lorraine's clothes. To the hidden tattooed woman, Daiga spat out his voice.

“Watch me. I'll nurture it splendidly.” Then he pulled Lorraine close.
“Our dreams aren't that fragile.” Lorraine's hands also wrapped around Daiga's back.
Enveloped in the scent of the tide, the two held each other tightly, forever.
Their lips touched when the stars began to twinkle in the night sky.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

I love walking. When my body gets sluggish from writing manuscripts, I immediately go for a stroll. Relying on my rough memory and intuition, I wander west and east through unfamiliar streets. I often stumble upon cozy cafes in unexpected places, discover cool used bookstores or model kit shops, and get completely absorbed in exploring them. It feels like a spontaneous journey with impromptu stops. (Though I never actually get off.) But I walk even during times when detours are tough.

Just the other day, I decided to walk home to Chiba from Shinjuku after the last train had gone. Everyone I was with offered warm words like, “You've got to be kidding,” “Seriously, that's impossible,” “You'll die,” and “You'll get attacked by bandits.” Then I set off.

In a state of walker's high, I silently plodded through late-night Tokyo. I took a cake break at a family restaurant along the way, but I ended up walking for about four hours until the first trains started running. Having once walked 50 kilometers from the depths of Saitama to central Tokyo, crossing the Yamanote Line is a piece of cake.

Of course, I've gotten lost countless times too.

Wandering around a dead-end landfill was scary, though. Two wild dogs, as big as calves, were staring at me intently from inside an abandoned car. I was absolutely convinced I was going to get eaten. Seriously! Other examples of my daily life include walking all the way from home to Tokyo Disneyland only to turn around and go home without even entering, walking ten kilometers after a meeting at Fujimi Shobo when no ideas came to me, or experiencing unexplained pain shooting through my entire body while walking in a certain cemetery.

When I post stories like that on my blog, my friends flood me with emails saying, “You walk way too much.” Then comes, “Take the train,” “Get a taxi,” “At least ride a bike,” “Give up being a paper driver, buy a car, and take me out for fun.” Man, they're all perfectly reasonable points! Transportation is faster, less tiring, and above all, more efficient.

Still, I'll keep walking. Even if it's slow, this is the pace that suits me. Taking breaks along the way, making detours, even getting lost—it's all fine. In fact, I should stop forcing myself to run when I don't have the stamina. No need to feel anxious watching cars and trains pass me by. It's not easy, but it feels like living at a natural pace.

However, I do want to speed up my work. I took quite a few detours while writing this work. Was it really necessary to eat pork kakuni manju in Yokohama Chinatown, play with pigeons in Yamashita Park, gaze at the passenger ship Asuka from the Osanbashi Pier, and drink cocktails at Landmark Tower?

And did I really need to assemble a plastic model of Captain Marseille's Messerschmitt and confirm Skorzeny's exploits in a wargame?

Well, I think I did. I feel like I did. I hope I did... In any case, I will continue to walk forward without forgetting my playful spirit.

I hope to see you again soon. See you then!

July 2005, Takeo Ichikawa

Translator's note:

Hi guys! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s masterpiece, **TATTOO BLADE 2**! Once again, a special thank you goes out to **aNobody101** for telling me of the method of obtaining the raws on **Bookwalker** – without his help, this translation wouldn't exist! While I personally think that the first book was better, this one has some very good elements – I for one very much enjoyed Zett, he and Daiga bounce off of each other very nicely! It's a shame that this was the last book in the series – even in the afterword Ichikawa-sensei didn't say about any plans for a continuation… Then again, this was probably his intention considering the mention of the one-hundred and eight demons – we'd need as many books as there are in ToAru to get through allat! Besides, the story ended on a great note, I think. I won't be doing any translations for awhile, but if I do, then I think I'll do one for Ichikawa-sensei's **first work**, the one with samurai, ninja, feudal japan – all that thing! Yeah…

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a very TATTOO day!